

Saskatchewan's independent newsmagazine

# BRIARPATCH

Volume 28, Number 8

October 1999

\$3.00



**GLOBALIZATION** meets the face of  
**INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY**



## FAT CATS

Do the rich "earn" their wealth? Last year Sandy Weill, CEO of Citigroup, earned \$166 million (US) while the total return to his shareholders was negative 6.8 percent. And Disney's Michael Eisner managed to score \$576 million (US) while the company's shareholders were stuck with a 5 percent loss.

You've got to hand it to rich people in the U.S. They know how to make money from the poor, the working class and the middle class. In 1983 the top one percent of Americans owned 33 percent of the wealth in the U.S. By the end of the Reagan and Bush years, the wealthiest had increased their share of the pie to 37.4 percent. And under Bill Clinton, they've increased their share to 40.1 percent.

## SOLIDARITY WORKS

The Bank of Nova Scotia has finally pulled its financing out of Oregon Steel, the anti-union company that provoked a bitter strike in Pueblo, Colorado two years ago.



*Pueblo Steelworkers Frank and Jean Bonetta travelled across Canada asking people to stop banking with Scotiabank.*

The company brought in scabs despite an unconditional offer by striking workers to return to their jobs. About 1,000 members of the United Steelworkers of America have been off the job since.

In an effort to put pressure on Oregon Steel, the union

called for a boycott of the bank, and as a result \$21 million was removed from the Bank of Nova Scotia by working Canadians.

## FRONT LINE OFFICE WORKERS

Office workers face special challenges in the workplace and the labour movement. Union representation and labour activism are often different for them than for workers in manufacturing or service industries. With that in mind, the Ontario Federation of Labour has a free manual, *An Activist Guide for Front Line Office Workers*. Contact the Ontario Federation of Labour, 15 Gervais Drive, Suite

202, North York ON M3C 1Y8. Phone (416) 441-2731. Fax (416) 441-1893.

## MANY RIVERS TO CROSS

*Many Rivers to Cross* is a 90-minute videodocumentary which took almost a year to complete and chronicles the torturous route of the 1997 contract negotiations between the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, Canada Post and the federal government. The documentary condenses more than 80 hours of tape into a compelling story which reveals what it's like to negotiate with an employer reluctant to engage in free collective bargaining. To request copies of the video write: CUPW c/o *Many Rivers to Cross*, 377 Bank Street, Ottawa ON K2P 1Y3.



## SAFER NEEDLES

The American Hospital Association is opposing legislation backed by the Service Employees International Union that would require hospitals to use safer needles. Syringes designed to reduce accidental needlestick have been around for more than 10 years but are a bit more expensive. The union estimates that a million health care workers are accidentally stuck with needles each year. More than 1,000 contract serious infections like HIV or hepatitis C.

## BRIARPATCH BENEFIT

The Barnard-Boecker Centre Foundation and Victoria Friends of Briarpatch present a Gala Benefit Evening on November 10 in Victoria, B.C. The event will feature a gourmet dinner, entertainment, door prizes, an auction and more. Southern Vancouver Island area subscribers will receive a detailed invitation. If you have suitable items for the auction, want more information or tickets, call Terry Wolfwood at (250) 595-7519. All the proceeds will benefit Briarpatch magazine.



**Briarpatch** is Saskatchewan's independent alternative newsmagazine committed to building a socialist democratic society. We provide an open forum for disadvantaged peoples and support progressive movements working to change unjust structures and build a genuine political and economic democracy. We support peace, equality, democracy, social justice, Aboriginal self-determination, and the protection of the environment. We oppose the oppression of people on the basis of nation, class, race, gender, ability, and sexual orientation.

# BRIARPATCH

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*The staff of the Mozambique Centre for Occupational Health and Safety Education and Development.*

*photo: Don Kossick*

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# The Labour Issue

**B**riarpatch is pleased to produce this special labour issue on international solidarity. Thousands of extra copies have been distributed among trade unionists across the country. We welcome our new readers and encourage you to subscribe.

**We would like to thank the coordinators of this special issue:**

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United Steelworkers of America Local 6571, Oshawa, ON



# International Solidarity

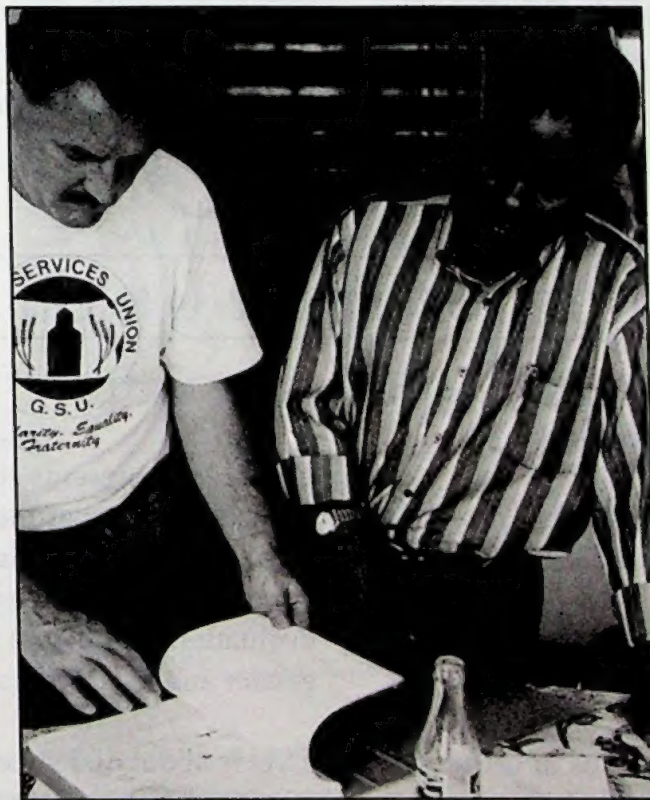
*The trade union response to globalization.*

by Adriane Paavo

Recently, I was sitting with friends at Regina's folk festival, listening to an African-Canadian band play music from Senegal and Cabo Verde. One friend leaned over and said, "You know, some things about globalization aren't so bad."

If all that globalization meant were a greater exchange of ideas and greater awareness of one another, that would be fine. But today's version of globalization, designed by global capital and its support institutions (such as the World Trade Organization, and national governments like Canada's), is not meant to reflect concepts such as sharing and respect. Much has and will be written about the current version of globalization. More important than recognizing what globalization looks like is to recognize that it is only one possible variation of international human relations. Many others exist. And it is possible to maintain those (accidental) good characteristics of the current model of globalization while replacing the bad ones.

Despite at time spending too much energy on internal



**GSU staff rep Walter Eberle and CEDESSET project director Victor Baloi discussing occupational health and safety.**

photo: Carol Brunt

and internecine disputes, the labour movement has also long acknowledged the importance of international solidarity. Long before alpha-geeks invented the Internet and bond traders realized how much money they could make spot-trading nations' currencies, workers knew the value of linking hands across borders. The Canadian labour movement has been enriched by the experience of trade unionists and activists from other countries, and in turn, Canadians have supported international struggles for generations. So with the new, ugly face of globalization at the end of the twentieth century, is labour's approach to international solidarity up to the challenge?

The answer is yes, based on the convincing arguments and information in this special labour issue of *Briarpatch*. The heart and soul of the issue is Ken Luckhardt's analysis of the progressive evolution of Canadian labour solidarity over the past 15 years. He shows that Canadian workers have much to be proud of, but challenges the movement to continue evolving, by expanding the geographic scope of



our work, by restructuring institutions such as the CLC's International Department, and by, above all, never losing sight of the need to place international solidarity issues among the other bread-and-butter issues that grass roots members know about, care about, and act on. Luckhardt makes a convincing call to prevent the bureaucratization of international working class solidarity.

Trish Elliott writes about a Saskatchewan example of international solidarity at work, in an article that would have fit in well into Luckhardt's overview. The Saskatchewan International Labour Program is an example of what unions can do together at the provincial level, as well as an example of a workers' initiative left out in the cold when "big labour" carved up the dollars left when the federal government cut its budget for overseas development.

Who should set the agenda in international solidarity

work? Lynda Yanz addresses this question head-on with a discussion of how workers in developing countries are trying to seize control of the process of setting corporate codes of conduct. Up to now, corporations or First World organizations have set the standards to be followed in economic free trade-zone and "sweat shop" production. Yanz points out that these codes are little respected or little known by the workers themselves, who are now speaking out about their own priorities. Workers in agriculture have also been taking steps to gain greater control over the terms of their work. Nettie Wiebe looks at the effects of globalization on small-scale food-producers and at the global network that these workers have been building.

Canadian labour has actively used international institutions like the ILO, international declarations and covenants, and campaigns to protect and advance workers'

# CSU

## A Trade Union for Trade Union Workers

Chances are, you haven't heard of the Canadian Staff Union (CSU).

We represent many of the staff who work for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

CSU members bargain contracts, handle grievances and arbitrations, organize workplaces and do the dozens of other jobs necessary to get the best possible wages, benefits and working conditions for public

sector employees.

CSU also represents staff from CUPE's branches and departments in regional and area offices who specialize in communications, education, research, job evaluation, health and safety, and race, gender and legal issues.

CSU is about 300 strong, and we serve over 460,000 CUPE members across Canada.



We work for union members, and we're proud to be union members too! We're dedicated to protecting and maintaining Canada's social programs and the jobs of the workers who provide them.

CSU congratulates Briarpatch for continuing the struggle as a progressive voice for working people and their organizations.



rights. Jean-Claude Parrot describes how the labour movement can act on the global stage to achieve our ends.

And if you thought that the current version of globalization was unstoppable, James Clancy can convince you otherwise. His article sets out a series of measures that concerned citizens must work to achieve in order to ensure that

the global economy serves all working people and citizens. His article also provides a useful thumb-nail sketch of the globalization we currently know and hate.

Finally, in separate articles, Sid Shniad and Eugene Plawiuk argue that labour has and must continue to adapt to emerging world conditions and technologies as we battle

the forces of global capital. Shniad spells out the need for labour to employ new communications technologies in global workers' struggles, as one of many tools in our handbag.

Labour activists have long dreamed that we would, through our struggles against injustice and want, unite the human race. As technology and the currently dominant economic model bring us all closer together, let it be for better, not worse. Canadian workers must choose to continue building a form of international solidarity which makes us all, side by side, the deliverers of our own salvation.

*Adriane Paavo is a staff representative for the Grain Services Union.*

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THE STEELWORKERS AT  
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Ken Neumann  
Director, District 3



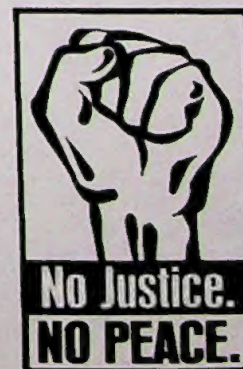
## For over a decade Grain Services Union has been involved in an Occupational Health & Safety Project with our Sister Union, SINTIAB, in Maputo, Mozambique

Improving working conditions and wages around the world helps workers in other countries, but it helps us, too. Solidarity means supporting someone else's struggle because their victory is also our victory. Solidarity knows no borders.

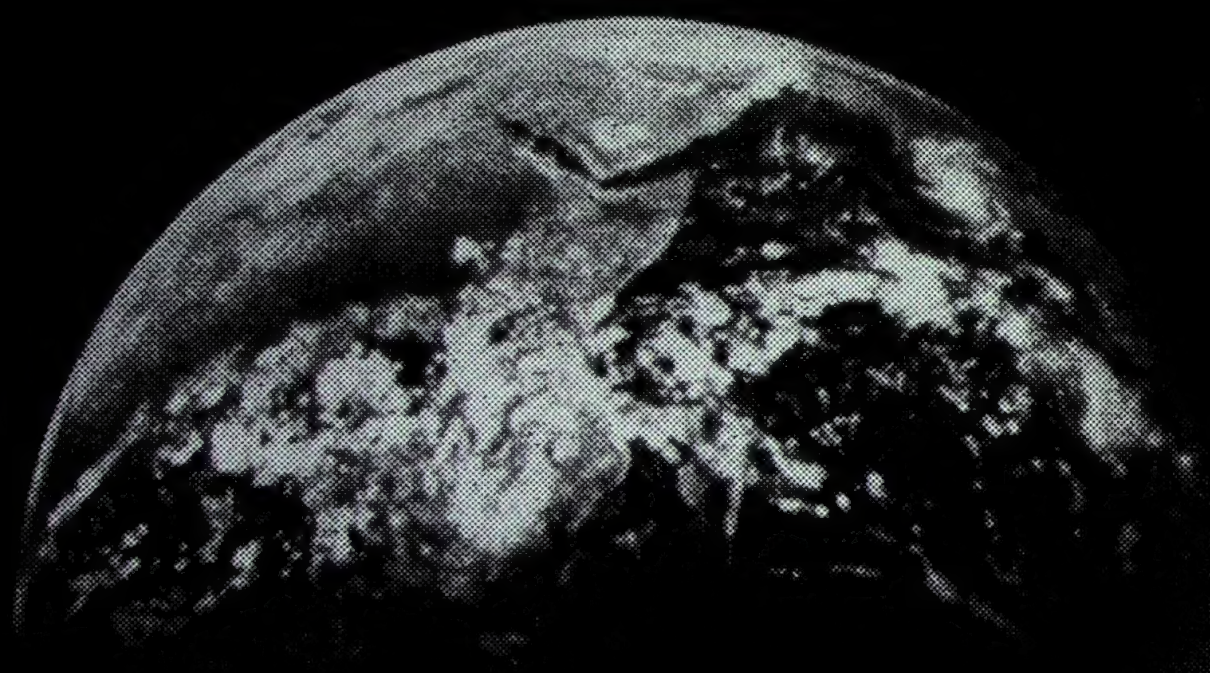


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# Shifting the Pendulum

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*Making the global economy work for people.*

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by James Clancy

**W**hy should all unionists involve themselves with the complexities of global economics and global finance? The answer is that we don't really have a choice. Because of the enormous impact the global economy now has on workers and their communities, in Canada and elsewhere, we must be involved.

Over the past 25 years, countries around the world have gradually given control of the global economic system to a handful of huge multinational companies.

- \* More than a quarter of the world's economic activity is now controlled by 200 corporations. They have combined annual revenues totalling \$7.1 trillion (representing almost twice the combined income of the bottom four-fifths of humanity).

- \* Of the 100 largest economies in the world, 51 are corporations.

- \* About 40 percent of global trade is actually multinational corporations trading with themselves, exchanging goods, services, financial capital, and other assets among their own subsidiaries and affiliates.

Under the new agenda, which financier George Soros has termed market fundamentalism, financial capital is now firmly in the driver's seat. Free markets and the profit motive are now held to be the solution to all of our ills - even when the collective interests of Canada and other countries, and their very sovereignty as nations, are placed at risk. The agenda promoted by these companies is supported, either actively or tacitly, by organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO).

As a result, multinational corporations now exercise a tremendous degree of economic power, unchallenged by any meaningful counterweight. This corporate power is seen when multinationals threaten to locate (or relocate) pro-

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## IT'S TIME TO PUT AN END TO THIS BLIND FAITH IN GLOBAL FREE MARKETS.

---

duction based *solely* on what concessions they can squeeze from countries and workers, and how much extra profit they can make in the process. Workers and communities are expected to compete against each other, to see who can offer the most concessions.

The international trade agreements our governments have signed not only didn't stop this, they have made it worse. They've made it easier for corporations to challenge governments, and harder for governments to hold the corporations to account.

We all see the results of this corporate agenda setting: massive job losses, seriously eroded social programs, lower corporate taxes (so we can be more "competitive" with other countries), weakened labour and environmental standards, and the privatization of an increasing number of public services.

That's wrong! It's time to put an end to this blind faith in global free markets. A quarter century of neo-conservative economics - of market fundamentalism - has taken too great a toll on working people and citizens around the world.

What's needed is a broad range of policy initiatives directed at the reform of the global economic system. These initiatives should be based on one basic premise: that the



global economy needs global rules. Otherwise, it can lead - indeed it has led - to the exclusion and impoverishment of millions of people around the world.

Among the initiatives that need to be implemented are the following:

- \* The end of the type of closed-door negotiations that brought us the Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA, and almost brought us the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). While the MAI might be history, a leaked European Commission document shows quite clearly that the principles contained in the MAI are very much alive and that efforts will likely be made in the near future to incorporate them into the WTO.

- \* Trade agreements that work in the interests of ordinary citizens, not huge corporations.

- \* The incorporation of core labour standards - a "social clause" - into the WTO. All states benefiting from membership in this global trade body should have to respect several ILO Conventions covering freedom of association, the right to organize and bargain collectively, prohibition of forced labour and child labour, minimum age standards and non-discrimination in employment.

- \* The creation of a strong international framework to control multinational companies. Not only countries, but also multinational corporations would have to abide by enforceable codes of conduct governing their behaviour. Transnational corporations would have to provide their workers, whether direct employees or contractors, sub-contractors, suppliers, or licensees, with living wages and decent living conditions.

## **Rick A. Engel, Anna Crugnale-Reid, Labour Lawyers Stephen McLellan, Articling Student**

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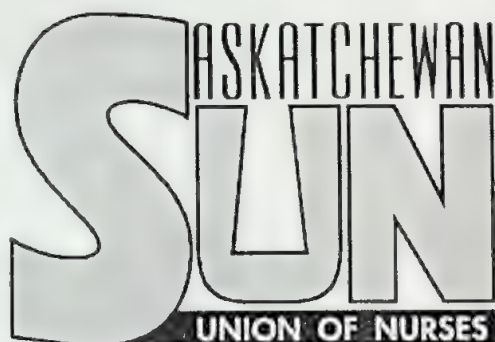


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# Thank you

*To everyone who supported  
nurses and worked with us  
as we struggled to achieve  
a collective agreement to  
keep nurses working in  
Saskatchewan-working for  
a healthy tomorrow.*



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**"MANY VOICES...ONE UNION"**

\* Fundamental reform of the IMF and World Bank, whose loan and rescue packages have often made things a whole lot worse for the countries and people they "help."

\* The institution of a tax on financial transactions (a Tobin Tax), in concert with the international community, as recently recommended by Parliament when it passed an NDP-inspired motion to that effect.

\* The cancellation of a large portion of Third World debt (going well beyond the rather meager amounts proposed in a March 1999 federal proposal.)

\* Effective measures to stop multinational firms from moving production and jobs from high-wage labour markets to other markets where the labour costs are lower - even when operations are already highly efficient and highly profitable.

\* A more effective global tax system to deal with tax avoidance by multinational corporations. A study by four U.S. economists showed how the average U.S.-based multinational firm used income-shifting to reduce taxes to 51.6 percent of what they would otherwise be.

The National Union of Public and General Employees is pushing this agenda whenever and wherever we can, including through our international organization, the Public Services International, which represents some 10 million workers in over 150 countries. Our main objective is to get our ideas, our alternative agenda, into the public domain.

This won't be easy, that's for sure. But union members have some other levers many may not be aware of. As an example, many union members aren't aware that Canadian workers now have some \$480 billion invested in their pension plans. On a world-wide basis, the figure totals U.S.\$10 trillion.

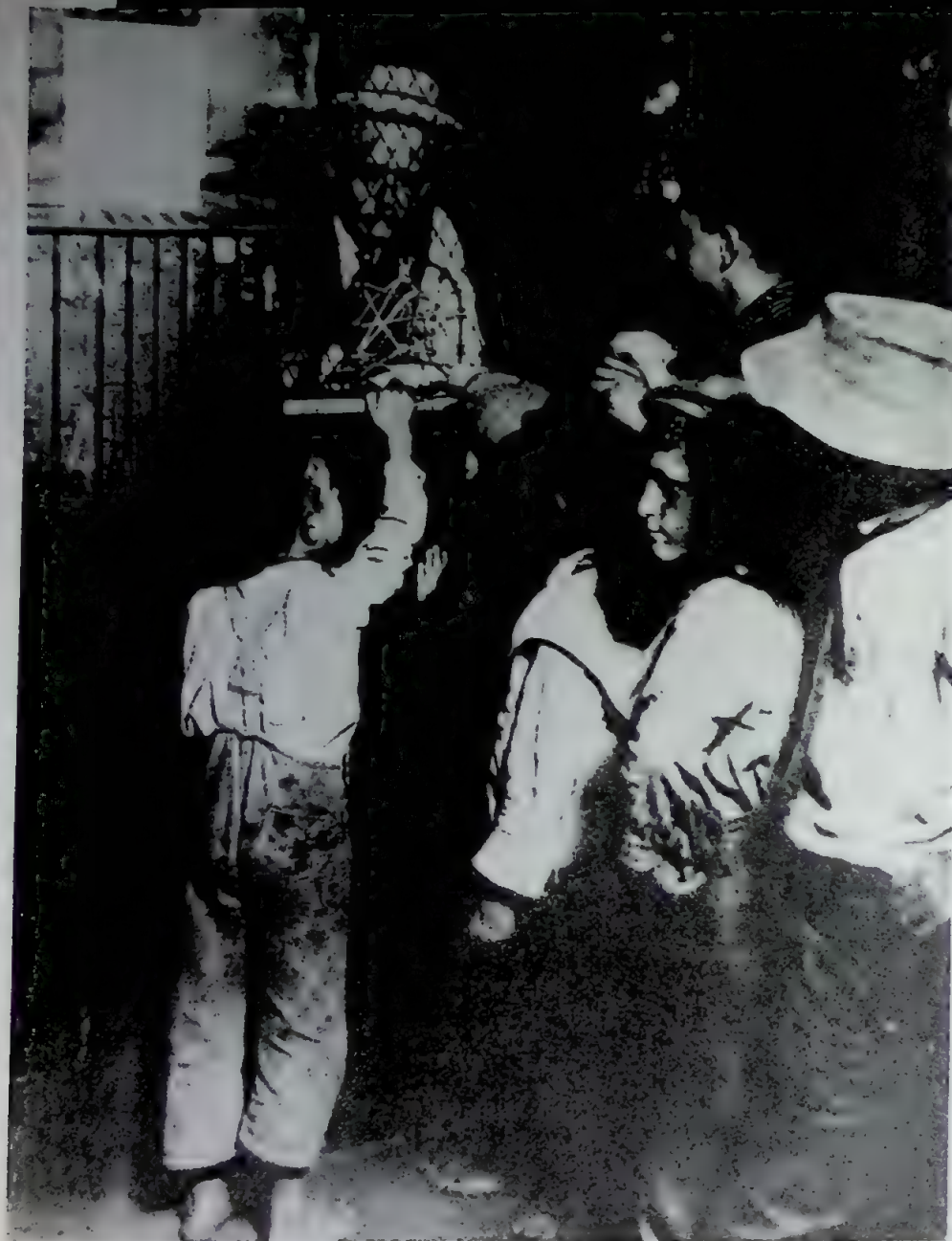
That money gives working people lots of potential power that can be used to ensure that their money actually promotes workers' interests - instead of being invested in firms that eliminate jobs, privatize public services, pollute the environment, or exploit child labour. The workers I've talked with are outraged that their pension investments are often being used for those purposes. They're highly supportive of efforts by their unions to attain more control of their pension money and have it used to support the things they believe in.

And remember, the pendulum always shifts. I know it may sound a bit strange, but I'm encouraged by the fact that more and more people seem to be recognizing some of our concerns, and are starting to propose some of the same solutions.

The bottom line is that the global economy should be working for people. We must do our damndest to make that happen.

*James Clancy is National President of the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE).*





**Y**oung workers line up for their pay at a turn of the century factory. Some are as young as six. Many don't have shoes.



*Saskatchewan  
Federation of Labour*

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**N**o group fought harder to end child labour than trade unions.

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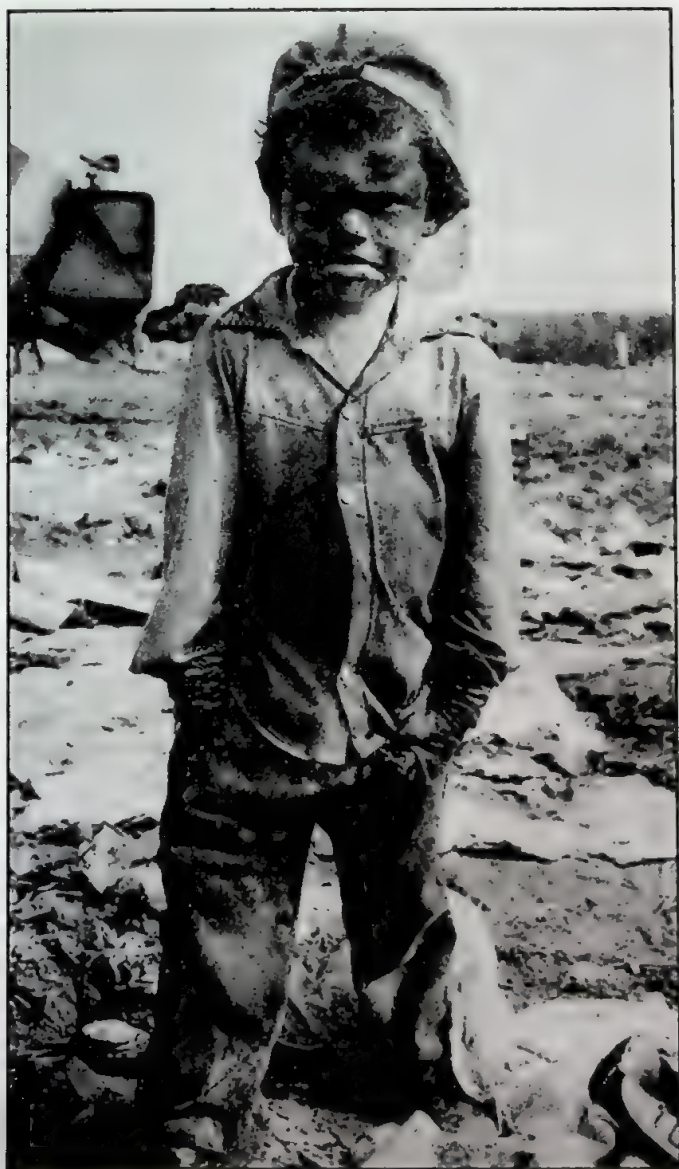
# Common Cause

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*The International Labour Organization  
champions workers' rights.*

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by Jean-Claude Parrot



**Among the most hazardous jobs is scavenging. Children, like this boy in Brazil, collect used paper, plastics, rags and bottles from garbage dumps, selling them to retailers for recycling.**

photo: UNICEF/1457/Edinger

**T**he International Labour Organization (ILO), through the participation of unions world-wide, has become the international champion of workers' rights. Now that unregulated global trade is at an all-time high and the ideology of world capitalism is virtually unchallenged in the minds of most policy-makers and the media, workers of the world need the ILO as never before.

Recent times have seen the growth of more exploitive forms of work around the globe. The world's worst industrial fire and industrial accident in history: respectively, the Kader toy factory fire in Thailand which killed hundreds, and the Union Carbide disaster in India which killed hundreds and injured (some permanently) thousands. We have also seen explosive growth in child prostitution, and millions of children working on sneakers, fire works, clothing, medical instruments, and jewelry - bound for markets in rich countries. All of these are late 20th century phenomena.

The grim work statistics are well-known to activists: 250 million children work - at least half of them in dangerous or degrading circumstances. Millions of workers around the world are denied their right to join a union and to nego-



tiate their working conditions, while thousands have been killed, arrested and tortured for union activities. Millions of workers are forced to work for the state under conditions and wages that amount to slavery. Millions of workers are denied employment because of their race or gender. Millions of other workers are victims of work-place accidents, while one million are killed on the job each year due to unsafe working conditions.

Don't think that this phenomenon is exclusive to developing countries. Hard won labour laws and safety protections are under attack in industrialized countries at a time when sweatshop conditions are returning here, too.

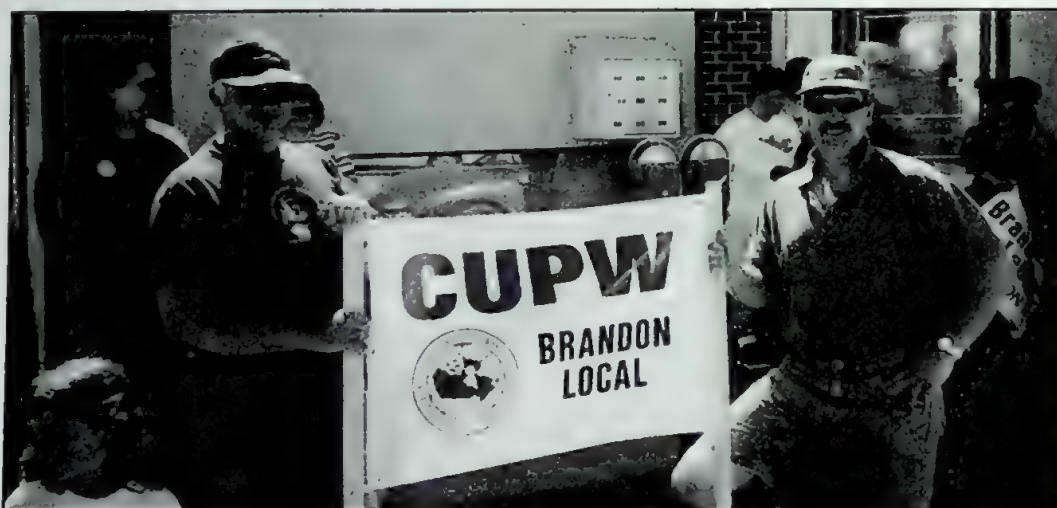
The ILO has been toiling to create global standards governing work since its founding in 1919. But for the most part, it laboured in obscurity and without authority. It is the only international organization composed equally of governments, employers and workers, today hailing from 174 countries. Every year, 2,000 delegates attend an ILO Conference to create new agreements to protect people at work and in their communities, as well as to review countries' adherence (or non-adherence) to existing standards.

The first agreements were won to protect merchant sailors on the high seas. These narrowly-focused agreements only affected a few thousand men and the pecuniary interests of single industries. But today's more far-reaching conventions seek to protect hundreds of millions of men and women. They ban child labour, uphold the right to organize unions and forbid employment discrimination based on race and gender. They touch the powerful commercial interests of virtually every nation and rightly require them to bear much of the burden of change, but this often unites these interests in opposition.

For the last several years, the ILO has attempted to include protections for workers

and their communities in international trade agreements. A year ago, the ILO took a bold step in this struggle. A Declaration of Rights and Principles was adopted which renewed the call for governments to adhere to the ILO Constitution. This will ensure that freedom of association and free collective bargaining are respected, that forced labour and child labour are not used, and discrimination in employment doesn't exist within their borders.

All previous ILO agreements required countries to ratify them before the agreements applied. And many simply don't sign. The Declaration was different - its observance is mandatory. The Declaration applies to all member countries whether or not they have ratified the conventions



Brother Bob Riddle  
Vice President  
Local 708  
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Brother Fred Wiebe  
Secretary/Treasurer  
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**In Union is Strength**



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on these fundamental issues.

Though labour unions have long had global ties, the ILO has been the only forum in which they could raise these crucial issues and get international agreements. Now, labour can build on the foundation these conventions provide because the movement has become more effective than ever at coordinating across international borders. A major labour violation or tragedy this morning is communicated around the globe on the Web by this evening, uniting unions and their activists in a common cause.

In addition, the increasingly media-savvy ILO publicizes their agreements and brings examples of violations to journalists around the world, taking a lesson from movements which have successfully used the international press to generate pressure.

The truth is, that if each of the ILO's grim statistics related to disease instead of exploitation, our media would be filled with the stories. The data gathered by the ILO exposing global working conditions is voluminous, but the media, for the most part, only uses it when they need a sensational headline. They have yet to show any interest in initiating a meaningful debate on what can be done to address the plight of exploited workers.

By contrast, the media provides significant coverage to Team Canada's investment tours in countries which are the worst violators of the fundamental rights they have com-





mitted to promote.

Governments often talk out of both sides of their mouths on matters that relate to money, powerful corporations and trade. When they testify before human rights tribunals or UN social summits, nations (including ours) make it sound as if their only concern is for workers and the environment. But as we have seen over the last several years with Team Canada, they speak a different language on trade missions and before trade bodies such as the World Trade Organization.

From Canada's trade visit to Korea, to welcoming Indonesia's dictator to the APEC (read "business") Summit, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien has excluded workers' rights from serious discussion. In 1995, the PM proclaimed that workers' rights are an internal matter. More recently, he stated that he will raise human rights violations privately with heads of state, but stronger or more public expressions of concern are simply not going to happen.

This position only makes Chrétien and his government typical in international trade circles. Ironically, leaders in developed countries assert that international trade will facilitate the realization of human rights around the globe, while leaders in developing countries assert that the realization of these rights will hamper trade.

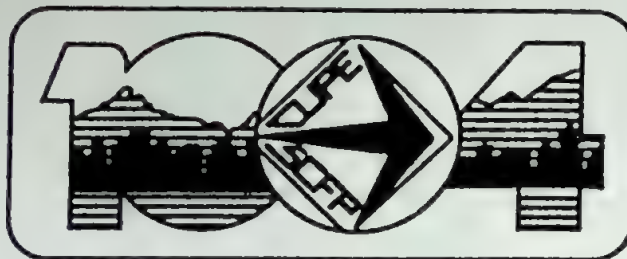
With last year's declaration, the ILO's governing body has clearly agreed that it is the role of the ILO to monitor the respect of these Rights and Principles, to promote them, to provide technical assistance, to demand reports on the success or failure to enact and enforce them, and to publicize any violations.

The delegates to this year's ILO Conference just adopted a Convention calling for the immediate elimination of the *worst* forms of child labour. Because it addresses the worst child practices, it is seen as an important and practical step towards the total elimination of child labour which will garner a large ratification rate compared to, for example, the ILO convention on a minimum employment age.

ILO conventions are perceived as international regulations, and the Employers' Group understands this. As a result, they have opposed the adoption of most of the recent conventions and continue to support governments which deny the link between labour rights and trade. These governments consider this kind of convention protectionist. However, it seems clear that the worst form of protectionism is practised by governments which allow employers to use their children to work and - as if this wasn't bad enough - allow them to work in the worst conditions for meager compensation.

The same criticism must be leveled at governments which have opened Export Processing Zones (EPZ) which offer employers the guarantee of unregulated operations and a non-unionized work-force. The exploitation of workers in these zones, who are mostly women, is nothing less than

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a form of slavery.

Fortunately, in the last five years, the majority of governments supported the Workers' Group (over the strong objections of the Employers' Group) on conventions such as homeworkers and part-time workers. The ILO has also managed to push through conventions on health and safety in mines and protection against major industrial accidents.

There remains strong opposition to the implementation of these fundamental principles and the new Director General of the ILO, Juan Somavia, will face quite a challenge. I am confident that his experience as Ambassador for Chile to the United Nations and as Chair of the Copenhagen Social Summit will make it possible for him to continue to make progress. The work he has done already, including at this year's conference, may be the best indicator of this hope.

The labour movement must more effectively pressure our governments to play a leadership role in the realization of workers' rights and other human rights around the world. This will become possible when employers, their contractors, sub-contractors and subsidiaries are exposed for violating the principles which their governments have committed to promote and protect.

It is a sign of the perversity of our governments that trade has become more important than the basic rights of people. NAFTA is one example of a trade agreement that has not benefitted workers in any of the three signatory nations. Mexican workers, who at least were supposed to see their standards of living moving in the direction of the United States and Canada, are now in a worse situation than they were before. Working Americans and Canadians have also seen a deterioration of their standards of living.

Only a well-coordinated international campaign will bring enough pressure on our governments to force them to take measures to stop the exploitation of workers in the maquiladoras (EPZ) in Mexico, the denial of freedom of association in right-to-work states in the U.S., and in sweatshops in Canada where we also see workers being denied the right to unionize.

As the world becomes smaller, the ability of labour within the ILO to fight effectively for the most exploited people on the planet is growing. But the ILO is, after all, only a tripartite process - one that depends on a strong labour movement determined to stop and expose the governments which allow employers to exploit their citizens, and also the employers who do so.

For more information on the ILO or the CLC, log on to our Web site and connect by link to the ILO: [www.clc.ctc.ca](http://www.clc.ctc.ca)

*Jean-Claude Parrot is Executive Vice-President of the Canadian Labour Congress and is a member of the Governing Body of the International Labour Organization.*



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## **INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' SOLIDARITY**

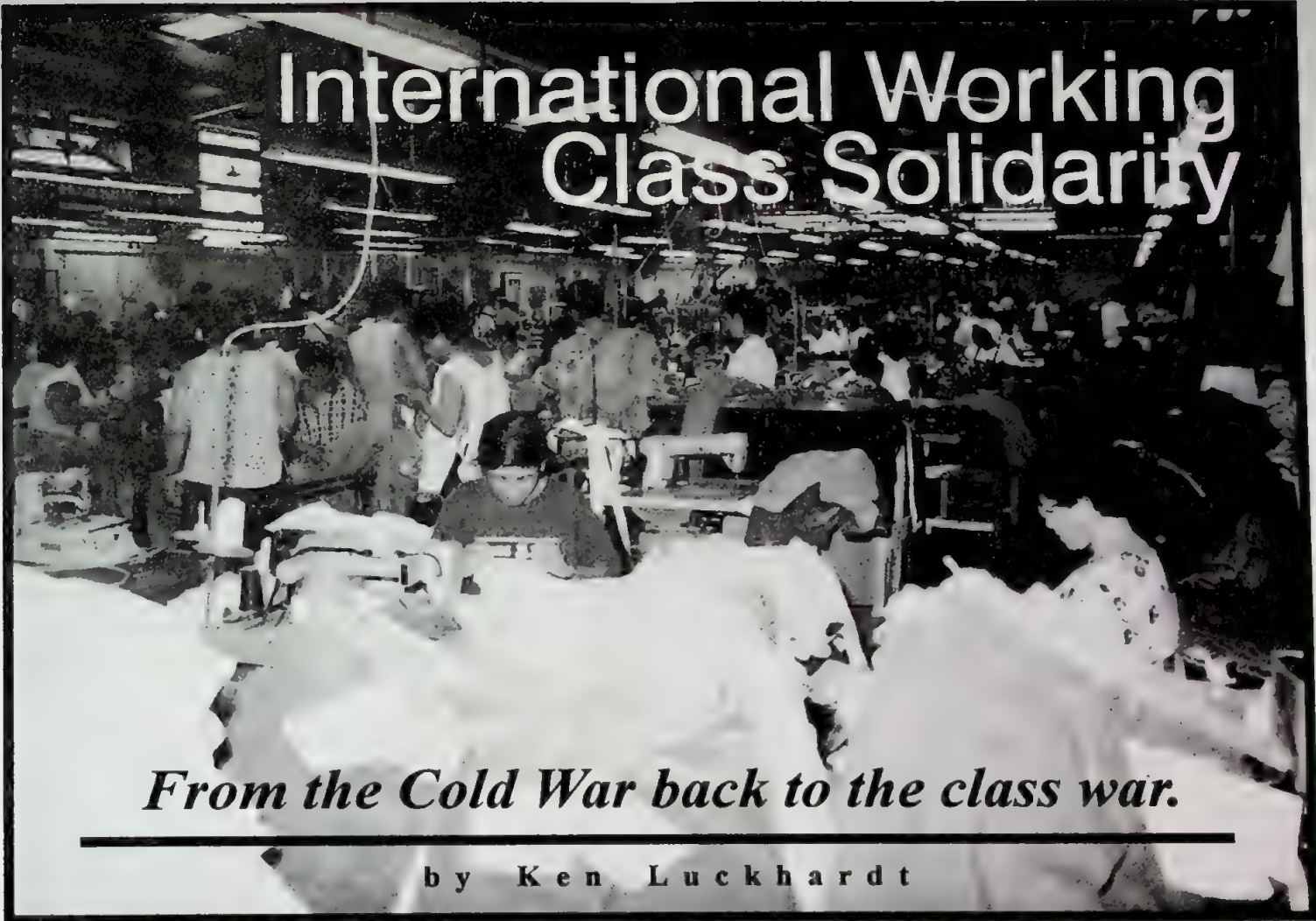
Corporate power is global in nature. To effectively fight the corporate desire for cheap labour through the suppression of workers' rights, resources need to be dedicated to building international links between workers and their organizations throughout the world. The union movement must support workers' struggles in other countries with the understanding that their victories are our victories.



We salute those union activists in Canada who continue to dedicate themselves to making international solidarity a priority within their unions.

**CUPW Regina Local  
CUPW Saskatoon Local**





# International Working Class Solidarity

*From the Cold War back to the class war.*

by Ken Luckhardt

*Maquila workers in Nicaragua.*  
photo: courtesy CEP Humanity Fund

It's been 13 years since Marv Gandall wrote his controversial essay entitled "Foreign Affairs: The CLC Abroad" published in *This Magazine* in February 1986. Those who never read it should, and those who vaguely remember it, should read it again.

Gandall exposed in great detail the Cold War policies and practices of the CLC's International Affairs Department in relation to apartheid in South Africa, socialism in Nicaragua, and Palestinian rights in the Middle East. The most revealing of the many examples cited by Gandall was the documented story of how then CLC International Affairs Director John Harker actually attempted to front for a South African corporation, Barlow Rand, to promote sweetheart unionism in the mining sector after the apartheid regime had been forced to recognize black unions.

Gandall concluded his article with the following prediction: "For the foreseeable future, the most concrete acts of solidarity will continue to take place below the level of

the Congress, and often in defiance of it." He was right, but then the unexpected happened...

The Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989 and shortly thereafter, albeit dramatically, so did the Cold War politics of the CLC International Affairs Department. With the ascendancy of Bob White as head of the Canadian labour movement in 1992, and with the emergence of capital's neo-liberal agenda in the form of globalization, the CLC and its affiliates - separately, but sometimes acting together - have begun to shape the parameters of a coherent and progressive approach to international working class solidarity.

The purpose of this article is to describe that recent history and to offer some modest thoughts on the way forward.

## The Emergence of Labour Solidarity Funds

Historically, Canadian unions have a long, if uneven, record of engaging in serious programs of international



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solidarity (as distinct from humanitarian responses to crises commonly caused by a combination of natural and "man"-made disasters). Although there would be many exceptions, left-led unions have most commonly been in the forefront of solidarity on a global basis.

The resources to carry out protracted solidarity were always meagre, but the political consciousness that motivated the solidarity was rooted in solid working class, anti-capitalist traditions.

With the abrupt end of the Cold War and the resultant hegemony of global capitalism, and with the aimless, rightward drift of social democratic parties seeking an accommodation with that system, there has emerged a new consensus among Canadian unions about the importance of international solidarity to challenge the power of capital.

This consensus did not spring from a conscious plan coordinated by the central body, nor did it arise out of a programmatic unity of major affiliates who, let's be honest, continue to battle each other more often than not on the domestic front. Rather, the consensus emerged in response to the experience of actually doing international solidarity in one of the most reactionary decades of this century.

In 1985, the Steelworkers established its Humanity Fund in response to the famine in the Horn of Africa. In the early 1990s, the CAW created a Social Justice Fund, the CEP a Humanity Fund, and CUPE a Union Aid program. The funds were secured through the collective bargaining process with the financial formula of one cent per member per hour - the same formula used by the CAW, for example, in securing its Paid Education Leave program as far back as 1978.

The responses from employers to this demand have varied: some resisted and still do, yet others reluctantly agreed to contribute in exchange for a charitable receipt as the Labour Funds are registered as charitable organizations under Canadian law. These four unions jointly represent over 800,000 workers, and at least 150,000 of those members are covered by collective agreements that include the international labour fund provisions.

The concept has been well supported by local union members and bargaining committees, especially in Steelworkers and CAW jurisdictions. In the three-year period 1995-1998, there was a 60 percent increase in the number of collective agreements participating in these Funds, and the bargained benefits for international trade union work totalled over \$7.5 million.

The Funds are operated by union staffers on a full-time or part-time basis. Decision-making regarding the use of the money for international projects and development

education with the Canadian membership is ultimately made by top leaderships of the affiliates. The CAW also includes three external members who have made significant contributions to social justice struggles.

As the Funds found roots in their respective union cultures, the actual project programming gradually, but crucially, shifted from an emphasis on humanitarian responses



**Alex Keeney, CAW Ford Council chair with NUMSA members in Ford plant, in Port Elizabeth, South Africa.**  
photo: CAW - Canada

to a more progressive emphasis on establishing long-term partnerships with unions and their social allies in the underdeveloped world. With this shift in emphasis came the potential and eventually the realization that the Funds can work collectively on certain issues without jeopardizing their autonomy or accountability to elected leaderships.

### **Enter the CLC, CIDA and the LIDC**

By 1993, with the four previously-mentioned affiliates having Labour Funds, the CLC and the affiliates with Labour Funds combined to approach the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for block funding for Canadian labour development work abroad. Previously, CIDA had considered funding applications on a project by project basis.

CIDA responded positively and a three-year project was launched in 1995 under the name of the Labour International Development Committee (LIDC). The CLC and each of the four affiliated labour funds - Steelworkers Humanity Fund (SHF), CAW Social Justice Fund (CAW-SJF), CEP Humanity Fund (CEP-HF), and CUPE Union Aid (CUPE-UA) - continued to develop their own independent programs with partnerships abroad and development education for Canadian union members at home. In addition, annual Labour Development Forums have been coordinated by the LIDC member unions to collectively discuss broad topics such as labour rights in trade agreements and eco-



nomie integration in the Americas.

CIDA funding for the LIDC project totalled \$5.75 million for three years, although CIDA cuts in the final year of the project reduced the total to \$5.2 million. LIDC members contribute 30 percent of their Labour Fund monies to complement a 70 percent CIDA contribution for projects which meet CIDA guidelines. In 1998, the CIDA-LIDC project was extended for one additional year with CIDA contributing another \$1.7 million. Both parties agreed to set aside a new multi-year proposal until the results and evaluation of the original project have been fully reviewed. The LIDC agreement was a major impetus for the member unions to more energetically pursue direct union-to-union projects and long-term partnerships in the south.

The stated goal of the LIDC program is "to support the growth and advancement of a democratic, independent labour movement" as part of civil society's struggle to create sustainable development strategies in "a globalized world." Canadian unions with Labour Funds have identified poverty eradication (through collective bargaining), the promotion of human/workers' rights and democracy, gender equity, fair trade and engagement of civil society in debate on the neo-liberal agenda as the defining characteristics of our international solidarity work at the turn of the century.

### The Substance of Solidarity

Literally hundreds of international and domestic projects, some multi-year, have been initiated by the Labour Funds since their creation. To report in any detail on the substance of these many and varied projects would be impossible in one article. However, a 1998 independent evaluation of the three-year LIDC program has provided a useful overview of the Labour Fund projects which utilized CIDA matching funding.

Over 50 percent of the programming focused on union education/training and organizational development, except for the CEP Humanity Fund (CEP-HF) whose primary focus was on solidarity work in Free Trade Zones. Geographically, Latin America represented 55 percent of the LIDC program, with all LIDC partners having more projects in Latin America (especially Mexico and Chile) than in any other region. Africa was the second most common geographical focus at 20 percent, followed distantly by Asia (10 percent), the Caribbean (9 percent), the Middle East (5 percent) and "Other" (1 percent).

By agreement within the LIDC, the CLC is responsible for relations with international labour organizations and national labour centrals, while the individual Labour Funds work directly with international trade secretariats (such as the International Metal Workers and the International Transport Federation), and nationally-based unions most com-



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driver for Dynamex  
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CUPW member  
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monly in their sector.

A total of 74 projects were initiated during the life of the 1995-1998 LIDC agreement. All were designed to promote three central objectives: (1) to build strong, self-reliant and democratic unions, capable of promoting and defending workers' rights and interests, (2) to further the social and economic well-being of working people through projects undertaken with both labour and social partners in the south; and (3) to contribute to a political environment which guarantees human rights and social justice.

One very tangible and progressive effect of LIDC programming has been the development of union education programs. The SHF's Facing Global Management program was adapted jointly with their Chilean mining union partner in Iquique. The CAW's Women's Leadership program was adapted by two women from the Mexican Women's Trade Union Network for wide use with Mexican sisters and subsequently by trade union sisters in Brazil.

The CEP engaged southern unionists in the creation of a New Management Technologies course which has applicability to unions throughout the Americas. CUPE's Union Aid funded the development of an educational curriculum for Mexican public sector union women on the impact of globalization on gender. The LIDC partner with the greatest emphasis on education/training projects is the CLC International Department itself, with over 50 percent of its

LIDC funds devoted to this priority. In Francophone countries, the Quebec Federation of Labour takes the lead on behalf of the CLC.

Health and Safety educational programs and projects have also been undertaken by most LIDC members with their southern union partners. Train-the-trainer programs are now being developed as a follow-up to the many educational programs on all the issues just outlined.

The three-year evaluation emphasizes that "the LIDC programme was particularly successful in targeting union women," with the demonstrable result that women's participation in the life of their unions, in union leadership positions and in national policy discussions has greatly increased. Beyond gender, LIDC projects have also strengthened unionists in the south to participate in coalition with their domestic social partners, in major policy debates concerning labour rights and trade agreements, and in north-south coalitions dealing with the range of struggles resulting from capital's neo-liberal agenda.

#### Four Funds, Four Examples

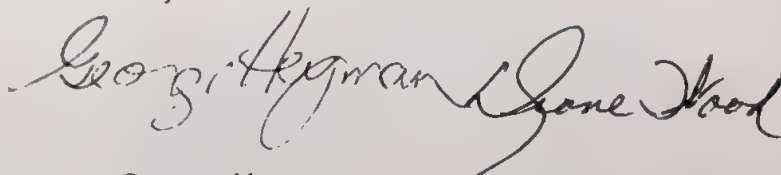
Beyond generalities, it is useful to highlight four examples of international solidarity projects undertaken by the four affiliates as part of the LIDC program. Two involve worker-to-worker exchanges, another the critical issue of gender and organizing work in free trade zones, and

## Labour Day '99

- there has been in excess of 120 murders of trade unionists in 1998 in Latin America
- in Columbia alone, over 90 trade unionists were assassinated in 12 months
- in Honduras, one of the local plantation workers' leaders was killed. Shortly before his death he had denounced the widespread use of toxic pesticides by the plantation planters.
- reminiscent of the horrors the unions thought belonged to the past, dock workers of Chile found themselves face to face with police armed with M-16s
- in Bolivia, 25 people were killed in clashes with police during strikes in 1996 and 1998. There is also evidence of the extensive use of child labour, some of it in conditions amounting to servitude.

## Strength in Solidarity

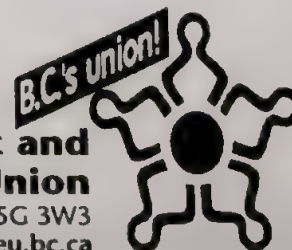
Being a trade unionist can still mean risking your life, your liberty or your job for defending legitimate rights recognized in international conventions. Let us extend our strength and safety to all those who need it, by holding the victory of their struggle in our thoughts, this day.



George Heyman  
President

Diane Wood  
Secretary-Treasurer

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finally, an educational initiative promoting women's involvement in their union.

#### **Steelworkers Humanity Fund (SHF): Chile-Canada Miners Exchange**

For many years the SHF has nurtured a strong international partnership between Chilean and Canadian miners. The Confederation Minera is a Chilean Labour Confederation representing private sector miners. The key Confederation member in this project is the Quebrada Blanca union comprised of 350 members, five elected representatives and no staff, based in Iquique, Chile. The president of the Chilean local had previously visited a Canadian steelworker local in B.C. They share the common employer, Cominco.

Phase III utilized LIDC funding and strengthened the capacity of both unions to deal with the impact of a globalized mining economy and, in particular, the increased Canadian ownership of Chilean mining operations as a result of a neo-liberal privatization scheme. The Chilean miners are experiencing health problems associated with high altitude work, and the logistical difficulty of carrying out union work with shifts of workers commuting the 250 km between the worksite high in the Andes and their homes at sea level in Iquique.

Exchanges in both directions have created trust be-

tween the union leaderships. A new course on the impact of mining on the environment was the basis for a union-environmental coalition for the first time in Iquique. A practical result of the course was access to a computer program to diagnose problems in the mines and the establishment of regular communication (e-mail and fax) between Chilean and Canadian unions for ongoing solidarity actions.

As a result of the joint development and implementation of a Globalization and Collective Bargaining education program in Chile, the mining unions (and the Quebrada Blanca local in particular) achieved significant gains in a new collective agreement. Health and safety language was greatly improved, and the Chilean local learned to bargain a range of benefits that directly improved the quality of life for working class families. The local union has gained greater respect within the community and the Confederation Minera speaks of its relationship with the SHF as a model in north-south union solidarity.

#### **CAW Social Justice Fund: Tri-National Ford Workers Exchange**

The CAW Social Justice Fund initiated a similar worker-to-worker exchange program, although in this case it involved local union leaderships from Ford plants in South Africa (represented by NUMSA, Brazil (CNM/CUT) and

## **Solidarity knows no borders**

CUPE is committed to advancing international solidarity on a worker-to-worker basis. We are pleased to announce that Union Aid, CUPE's international solidarity fund, has recently approved a two year Saskatchewan-Chile joint project with the following objectives:

- development of women union leaders in Chile
- research of women's issues in Chilean health care workplaces
- creation of development materials
- exchange of expertise among health care professionals
- providing Saskatchewan health care union members with practical experience in international linkages
- promotion of international solidarity

For more information on this project or Union Aid, call 757-1009



*Canadian Union of  
Public Employees  
Saskatchewan Division*





Canada (CAW). The purpose of the exchange was to investigate issues of work organization in workplaces owned by a common employer and to share the experiences and strategies of three unions committed to social unionism.

The same union delegations from each union visited the other two countries; they met initially in Brazil, then Canada, and finally South Africa. The resulting relationships developed over the space of two years have created the basis for quick, practical and long-term solidarity in response to employer strategies in the globalized auto industry in the future. All three unions are affiliated to the International Metalworkers Federation, and the CAW-SJF has additional projects with both NUMSA and CNM/CUT.

The head of the CAW Ford workers delegation, Alex Keeney, addressed a class of CAW activists taking the union's Globalization and Solidarity course at the end of the project. He mentioned how the Canadian workers initially

assumed that they would be transferring their northern knowledge and union experience more so than learning new skills from their southern partners. Instead, the CAW delegation was amazed at how quickly the NUMSA and CNM/CUT leaders could mobilize their rank-and-file members

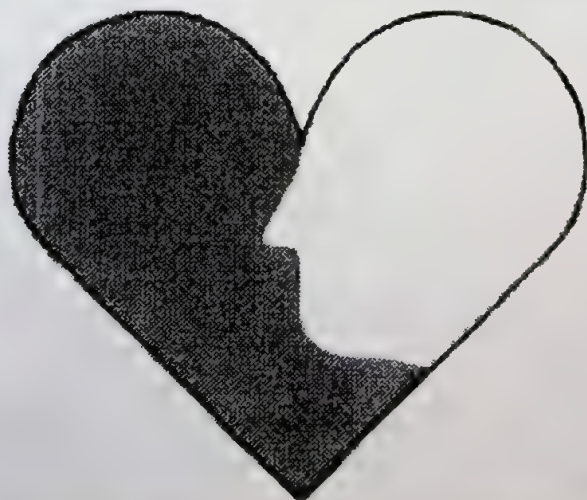


**Canadian postal workers attended the 1997 May Day parade in Havana, Cuba.**

photo: courtesy CUPW

## I.B.E.W. LOCAL 2067

### THE UNION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE & HUMAN DIGNITY



*Representing Employees of SaskPower, Prairie Coal, and City of Swift Current.*



for the immediate political tasks at hand in the community. Keeney concluded that such close contact with union members in Canada was a lesson that probably all Canadian unions could learn from their southern partners.

The CAW-SJF has more recently completed the first step of a more modest but similar exchange by hosting three representatives of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union, and the Fund has approved another tri-national exchange involving soft drink, confectionary and brewery unions from Colombia, Guatemala and Canada.

#### **CEP-Humanity Fund (HF): Labour and Gender Defenders**

Factor X is a Mexican organization involved in three areas of work: defense of labour and gender rights, workplace health and safety with an emphasis on reproductive and sexual health, and domestic violence and sexual harassment. In each area, direct services, training, organizational development and research are provided to women who work in the Free Trade Zones. Since 1995, the CEP-HF has partnered with Factor X to support the organizing efforts of maquiladora workers, especially women, by providing legal assistance, training and other support as required in a Defense of Labour and Gender Rights project. The CEP project also supports a health and safety training component.

In the face of tremendous obstacles, the project has succeeded in providing legal support to gain union recognition and redress in certain cases of violations of workers' rights. Contacts have been made with Korean unions to add a south-south dimension to the work of Factor X. An educational course on occupational health, reproduction and sexuality has also been successfully delivered.

In Mexico, lacking a strong democratic labour movement, the CEP partnership with Factor X is an excellent example of Canadian labour support for pre-union formations where the skills being developed will have a significant impact on workers' struggles and organizational capacity in the future. The project has also been crucial in linking local maquila workers with international labour organizations on specific solidarity campaigns. The CEP has also been commended by other LIDC unions for its emphasis on joint programming.

#### **CUPE-Union Aid (UA): Training Women Workers**

SUTDGF (Federal District Government Workers Union) represents public sector workers in Mexico City. It has 35,000 women in its membership, although there are only three women secretary generals among the 39 sections of the union. Fronteras Comunas (Common Frontiers) is a Mexican NGO that provides information, research and education on the issues of free trade, gender, environment and

**"The Oakville & District  
Labour Council urges all  
working class people and  
progressive people to fight for  
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alternatives to the exploitive  
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democracy.

The CUPE-UA project with Fronteras Comunas created a training program designed for SUTDGF women to analyze the impact of globalization and NAFTA on women workers. The goals were to develop a sense of sisterhood that would result in more women in leadership positions and also to foster solidarity between Mexican and Canadian women in public sector unions. CUPE staff and local union leadership have participated in the courses in Mexico.

The project yielded very tangible results for the women participants. Women are playing a more decisive role in the union and have succeeded in attaining a lunchroom for workers in one case and in securing food for the children of workers who attend childcare programs in another. A comprehensive course manual and videos provide the basis for future replication of the course.

### **Union Solidarity Beyond the LIDC Partners**

It would be highly inaccurate and unfair to suggest that only those Canadian unions that comprise the LIDC partnership are making a significant impact on international working class solidarity. The activities of four additional unions deserve mention by way of brief examples.

### **Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers of Canada (IWA-C)**

In December 1998, the IWA-C became the newest and fifth affiliate of the LIDC. Until the IWA Labour Fund can be negotiated with employers, the IWA-C 1997 Convention adopted a per capita financial formula which sees three cents per member per month go into the Fund. This is matched by a \$500 per month contribution from the national union. The Fund is mandated to support labour development projects in the southern hemisphere.

The IWA-C has already used its Fund to make a major, long-term commitment to partner with the National Confederation of Forest Workers of Chile (CTF), an affiliate of the Chilean labour central, the CUT. The CTF has 9,000 members, with 5,000 employed in manufacturing operations and the remainder in logging and pulp and paper sectors. In 1995-1996, the CLC assisted exchanges between the IWA-C and a CTF affiliate which were instrumental in the creation of the IWA-C's Fund and the IWA-CTF project. As well, the CLC and IWA-C organized a

conference on sustainable forestry practices, including health and safety and environmental issues, with 27 global participants, including the new CTF president from Chile. Already, the IWA-C project is helping the CTF to re-



***IWA Canada Local 2693 member Rolando Quintul, (third from left) visited CTF members in Chile.  
photo: courtesy CTF***

source its building in Concepcion, Chile from which the CTF will network with local popular organizations of campesino and indigenous communities and a regional NGO that promotes human rights, environmental struggles and democratic development in rural areas. The IWA-C plans to work with both CTF and CUT to develop educational curricula on democratic unionism, occupational health and safety, progressive labour legislation and an analysis of the impact of globalization on the forest industries of Chile and Canada. As Chile is part of a trade agreement with Canada and both countries are members of APEC, the IWA-C project has the potential to play an important role in promoting working class solidarity between Chilean and Canadian workers in their sector.

### **Grain Services Union (GSU)**

Since 1986, the GSU has been involved in a solidarity partnership with the National Union of Food and Beverage Workers (SINTIAB) in Mozambique. As Mozambique moved to a market economy in 1987, it was obvious that the union movement had to establish an independence from a one-party state system in order to defend the interests of workers. The GSU furthered this project by providing assistance with health and safety, an issue that had never been addressed under colonial rule and for which there was no tradition of struggle since Mozambique became independent in 1975.

In 1989, several GSU locals approved a dues increase



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which would send 50¢ per member per month to the union's international solidarity fund. In 1997, this was expanded, and the GSU now contributes 50¢ per month per member into the fund.

The GSU broke new ground by being the first union to engage Mozambican workers in serious health and safety training. By 1994, four unions operating in six workplaces were involved in the project. The GSU project created the Occupational Health and Safety Development and Education Centre (CEDESSET), a local NGO made up of unions and community organizations. The project had reached over 13,000 workers and union activists in 27 workplaces in the central and southern regions of the country by 1998. The project will be expanded into northern Mozambique this year.

The key priority is to train shop-floor workers to identify health and safety hazards in the workplace and to mobilize to resolve those problems. Over the past two years, special emphasis has been placed on addressing the needs and concerns of women workers.

Another key priority of the project has been to engage the Mozambican government in a process to ratify ILO conventions regarding health and safety at the workplace and to regulate the use of chemicals at work - especially in an era of increased multinational investment in the country. The goal is to create a tripartite forum that will regularly discuss these concerns.

The Centre has received funding from CIDA, Partnership Africa, CUSO, the CAW, the Steelworkers Humanity Fund and other donors in addition to the long-standing support from the GSU based in western Canada. SINTIAB and the GSU hold permanent director positions on the CEDESSET Board.

### **Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW)**

Although the CUPW has not yet succeeded in negotiating a Labour Fund with its intransigent employer, Canada Post, Canadian unionists readily acknowledge that CUPW has always been in the forefront of working class solidarity with the struggles in countries such as South Africa, Cuba, Nicaragua, Grenada, East Timor and Colombia.

The domestic battle to negotiate an international solidarity fund with Canada Post has led CUPW conventions and policy forums to establish strong membership support for international work. As a result, the union has adopted clearly articulated policies on the issue of international solidarity to a degree that may even surpass Canadian unions with Labour Funds already in place. A major entry point for CUPW in the globalization debate is the extensive privatization and deregulation of postal administrations in the developing world and the fact that Canada Post, with CIDA funding, has extended its tentacles in many southern countries through its involvement in "modernization" programs

to their postal systems, for example in Guatemala, Trinidad and Tobago, Chile, Brazil, China and the Philippines.

Without a negotiated fund, the national leadership of CUPW has provided necessary resources for a number of initiatives in recent years: the "twinning" of CUPW locals with locals of the Cuban Communications Workers Union, linkages between Quebec and Montreal regions and the Haitian Postal Union, a cross-Canada tour of five Chilean postal workers in 1998, and continued solidarity in the struggle for self-determination in East Timor. Many of these initiatives emerge from the activist base in CUPW regional structures, which in turn have often fundraised for international activities.

Finally, the CUPW National Human Rights Committee responded to the CLC Anti-Racism Task Force Report by deciding that international solidarity is to be a major component of their human rights work. The CUPW-NHRC has further urged the CLC and its affiliates to increase the involvement of aboriginal workers and workers of colour in international solidarity work.

### **International Longshore and Warehouse Union - Canada (ILWU)**

The most important measure of a union's commitment to working class solidarity is its response to a crucial international struggle. The ILWU in both Vancouver and on the U.S. coast deserve full credit for their immediate response to the Australian dockworkers' struggle in April 1998, considered the worst industrial dispute in Australia in a century.

Through a conspiracy involving the Australian government, Patrick Stevedoring and the National Farmer's Federation, Patrick fired over 1,400 stevedores in 17 port terminals in an attempt to once and for all break the power of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA). Reports had circulated for months before the dispute that scab labour was being trained in Dubai, and the International Transport Workers Federation had alerted international affiliates of the potential need for solidarity with the MUA.

When the retrenchments took place, evidence surfaced that the Australian government had extended a \$250 million line of credit to finance the termination of the unionized workers. Aussie judges also tried to play their part in union-busting by issuing an injunction that barred all citizens of the state of Victoria - not just the workers - from expressing any solidarity with the MUA within 200 metres of the stevedoring company's property.

The ILWU immediately responded to MUA faxes by investigating the arrival of any ships that would arrive on the West Coast that had been loaded by scabs at the Patrick facilities. By the end of the dispute, ILWU locals in the U.S. had refused to unload three ships; in Vancouver, the entrance site was totally shut down in a successful act of



international solidarity. Finally, the ILWU in the U.S. and the MUA in Australia negotiated an arrangement whereby all targeted ships would return to Australia, have the scab labour cargo discharged, and then be reloaded with MUA unionized labour. On April 21, an Australian Federal Court ruled in favour of the MUA by determining that the company had been involved in an unlawful conspiracy.

These actions by Canadian dockworkers are only the most recent example of their decisive and effective international solidarity. We should never forget that during the struggle against apartheid South Africa, it was members of the ILWU and Local 400 of the former CBRT&GW in Vancouver that were crucial in tracking and frequently interrupting the trade flows of cargos that plied back and forth between Canada and South Africa. Their actions were always in keeping with the call for sanctions from the ANC and SACTU through their Canadian offices.

### **Solidarity groups and NGOs play a unifying role**

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of very important solidarity groups and NGOs that offer Canadian unions the chance to work together on the issues of globalization and neo-liberalism. The net positive effect is that unions are overcoming the tendency to work independently of one another and, instead, are discovering the benefits of collective action. Space limits prohibit an exhaustive analysis of the work of these solidarity groups, but three initiatives deserve brief mention.

### **Trade Union Group (TUG) and CoDevelopment Canada (CoDev)**

To offset the common Canadian pattern of concentrating organizational strength in Ontario, TUG and CoDev have developed a productive working relationship that mobilizes union solidarity efforts in British Columbia. TUG was formed as far back as 1981 by B.C.-based trade union activists who were "interested in having an impact on international issues within the labour movement." Membership is organizationally based and includes the CAW, CUPE, BCTF, HEU, HSA, PSAC and Health Sciences Staff Union.

CoDev emerged in 1985 as an NGO with an emphasis on an "agenda of social change in the Americas." It has worked closely with TUG to coordinate sector-to-sector linkage projects between north and south, while also offering the language interpretation skills of its staff.

TUG is best known in recent years for its Addressing the Maquilas project which develops solidarity relations between maquila workers in Central America and trade unions in British Columbia and western Canada. A number of exchanges have been undertaken to support the Central American Network in Solidarity with Women Maquila Workers, a regional body formed in 1996. In response to

the devastation of Hurricane Mitch, a total of \$60,000 was raised by TUG (including a CIDA match of \$25,000) and divided between its partners in Honduras - (the Honduran Women's Collective), and Nicaragua - (the Movement of Working and Unemployed Women, "Maria Elena Cuadra").

The TUG newsletter, *No Borders*, regularly communicates the struggles of Central American workers to the TUG affiliates and members in British Columbia.

### **Common Frontiers (CF)**

Based in Toronto, Common Frontiers has been the crucial solidarity group to organize Canadian labour and popular movement opposition to neo-liberal trade pacts. Formed in 1988, when the focus was on the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, CF organized 45 Canadian activists to travel to the Mexican border to examine the reality in anticipation of NAFTA. By 1992, Canadian labour was beginning to play a more significant role in CF and this coincided with the latter's partnership with RMALC, a Mexican coalition that parallels in structure and objectives the Action Canada Network in this country.

Staffed by very efficient and progressive activists over the years - firstly, Ken Traynor (formerly with the SACTU Solidarity Committee) and since 1994, Patty Berrera - Common Frontiers has tirelessly worked to link labour to la-



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bour and labour to popular movements throughout the hemisphere. According to Berrera, a major impetus to the work of Common Frontiers in making these connections come alive was the SHF worker-to-worker miners' exchange with Chile described earlier.

The CLC, under the leadership of Bob White, also played a major role in strengthening hemispheric solidarity in the early 1990s. The creation in 1994, for example, of a CLC NAFTA Desk to analyze and educate Canadian workers on the impact of trade deals that was directly responsible to White's office illustrates yet another progressive change that he brought to the CLC's international work. The CAW, CEP, CUPE, CTF, OSSTF, BCTF and nurses unions across the country have all been involved and instrumental in building Common Frontiers into the effective coalition that it is today.

In recent years, CF has broadened its geographical focus to do battle with new regional trade pacts and the anticipated Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). The latest and most important initiative is the building of what is known as the Hemispheric Social Alliance. Such a movement was initially called for by our Mexican partners and is designed to empower local groups throughout the hemisphere to challenge all expressions of capital's agenda. CF has had the foresight, with assistance from the LIDC labour partners, to emphasize that it is just as important for

anti-poverty activists to meet in common cause through north-south exchanges as it is for unions to do so. As for labour's long-term contribution in these hemispheric coalitions, Berrera reminds us that "the project will only succeed if unions do the necessary educational work with the membership."

### **Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN) and the Labour Behind the Label Coalition (LBTL)**

At the risk of over-simplification, the most common issue on the capitalist neo-liberal agenda to catch the political attention of northern activists in this decade is that of sweatshop production in the underdeveloped south. An endless stream of examples have exposed the low-wage, sexist, anti-union and violently repressive working conditions imposed on workers by local managements contracted to brand-name retailers in the north. In turn, a new wave of activism is emerging amongst social justice-oriented church members, consumers, unionists and yes, even university students (after decades of silence) in the developed world. The positive dilemma is how to shape that activism to advance working class aspirations in the south and go beyond liberal, consumer guilt in the north.

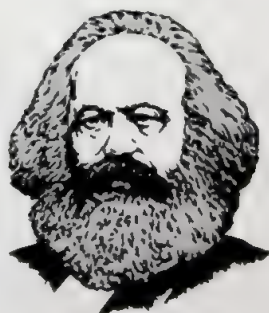
Shaping that response has been the primary work of a two-pronged solidarity organization operating out of Toronto. The Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN), with considerable financial support from the LIDC partners, has been very successful in forging educational and partnership linkages between north and south on sweatshop production, while the Labour Behind the Label Coalition (LBTL) has developed anti-sweatshop campaigns to engage Canadian activists. To the political credit of both organizations, they have worked closely with UNITE and its sister organization, the Homeworkers Association, to expose the fact that similar sweatshop working conditions imposed on mostly immigrant women exist in major Canadian cities.

Through a coalition of labour, church, and NGOs, MSN/LBTL has successfully led the campaign for a Federal Task Force on Sweatshops in Canada. After months of delays, it appears the Task Force will actually be convened in the near future. If it materializes and if it functions along lines acceptable to the labour-church-NGO coalition, the small staff of MSN/LBTL deserve all the credit for their tireless efforts.

### **Outstanding Issues**

The significant progress achieved in Canadian labour's international solidarity work since the end of the Cold War inevitably raises new issues for discussion and debate within and between unions. The failure to deal with the following concerns would, in my opinion, be a serious mistake and ultimately limit the ability of Canadian unions to respond

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to the urgent need for heightened solidarity across borders.

(1) How can the national unions ensure that their local leaders and activists are more directly involved in the definition and implementation of solidarity actions and campaigns? As unions increase the financial base for international work, there must be a corresponding effort to engage rank and file workers, the union's base, in the actual work of international solidarity. Their lack of involvement will not only weaken the long-term impact of the solidarity efforts themselves, but also lead to a potential lack of membership support for the overall initiative.

(2) Can the Canadian labour movement move beyond its current geopolitical focus on the Americas to develop equally important relationships, projects and campaigns in Asia? Pre-union and union organizations, along with their civil society partners, throughout East and Southeast Asia struggle against the same neo-liberal agenda with often even more repressive political regimes than in Central and South America. They deserve the solidarity of Canadian unions just as much as their counterparts in the Americas, and it will be a challenge to Canadian labour to find the means to respond with the level of solidarity needed in both regions. Strengthening the emergence of "south-south" union relationships between Asia, Africa and Central/South America offers an opportunity for Canadian labour to create a more equitable balance of solidarity to all global regions.

(3) How can the CLC International Department further redefine its role in the post-Cold War era? Can it become a much more activist central body that (a) mobilizes additional affiliates' resources for international work, (b) organizes inter-affiliate solidarity campaigns on specific struggles (such as Colombia, Burma, amongst many other possible options) and (c) creates working class momentum at home within Canada to seriously challenge the neo-liberal policies of the federal government that impact on our brothers and sisters in the South? If the CLC were to take on a more aggressive coordination role in Canadian labour's international program, I am confident that the affiliates would support such an initiative.

(4) Will the affiliates, including those who have negotiated Labour Funds with employers, commit even greater financial and human resources out of

their national treasuries over and above the monies bargained with employers? There are certain forms of solidarity that are more appropriately carried out by national unions than by the Labour Funds (which are inherently limited by the language of collective bargaining and charitable status legislation). Long before Labour Funds existed, it was the political will of national union leaderships and the support of educated memberships that built the links on the chains of international solidarity. A combination of national union and Labour Fund resources is a powerful weapon in advancing the cause of global justice.

A recent two-hour video documentary that tells the beautiful history of the Jamaican workers' struggle since the days of slavery ends with a statement by Frank Gordon, veteran leader of the Jamaican labour movement. His words offer no new insights but only a grand old message: "The emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers and the workers alone. Nobody can free us but ourselves."

If Gordon were thinking globally, he surely would have added, "and it can't happen in one country alone!"

*Ken Luckhardt is currently the Staff Representative of the CAW Social Justice Fund. Prior to joining the CAW in 1988, he spent 12 years in anti-apartheid work. He co-authored two books on the non-racial labour movement in South Africa, and chaired the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) Solidarity Committee-Canada from 1980-1987. The above article reflects the views of the author and not that of the CAW or any other labour organization.*

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# A Little History



*Ford strikers win union security after barricading the factory entrance to keep out strike-breaking provincial police and Mounties. Windsor, Ontario, 1945.*

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# Unions Without Borders

*The Saskatchewan International Labour Program's death-defying swing into the new millennium.*

by Trish Elliott

**S**ome future: corporatized, globalized, downsized and homogenized. What happened? How are we going to get our lives back? Don't worry, there are a few globally-minded grass-roots organizations out there that weren't totally blown away in the nineties. One of them is in Saskatchewan.

The Saskatchewan International Labour Program (SILP) was an institution forced to re-invent itself in a hurry just over four years ago. The spring of 1995 was supposed to be an exciting time for SILP, not a disaster. The group was preparing to move into a new storefront office in Saskatoon, along with One Sky, a well-known and heavily-utilized development education learner centre.

It's not like SILP expected smooth sailing, though. There was talk in the air of a one-third cut in federal funding to development education. That's why voluntary organizations like One Sky and SILP decided to bunk in together, confident they could ride out the cuts and improve their services at the same time.

By now, SILP had been part of the trade union scene for nearly two decades. Long-time board member Diane Rogers recalls how the group started up in 1978 at the suggestion of CUSO and Oxfam.

"They were looking for a way to get trade unionists interested in the developing world and issues of common concern to workers around the world," she says. The educational organization began as a project of CUSO and Oxfam, and was for a time under the wing of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, before becoming its own independent entity.

Bringing trade unionists together from around the globe



**Guatemalan human rights activist José Recinos spreads the message of global solidarity at the International Labour Solidarity School.**

**photo: Mike Raine**

was SILP's stock in trade, along with delivering workshops on emerging international issues. The group led tours to Mexico, Nicaragua and southern Africa. They also hosted visitors from several Asian, African and Latin American trade unions. The alumni of SILP-assisted and sponsored tours forged lasting friendships and an abiding interest in world labour issues.

As the movement toward global free trade grew, so did the demand for information and education. SILP was going great guns - creating links, joining picket lines, holding conventions, hosting tours.

"Then everything fell apart," says Rogers.

In a move that government officials now admit was probably a mistake, the federal Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) lopped off not just a third, but *all* its funding to international education programs like SILP.

"We didn't expect it," Rogers remembers. Overnight,



the new store-front office closed its doors and One Sky folded. SILP laid off its Saskatoon staff and auctioned most of its office equipment, although they didn't get much cash for the items. The remainders went into storage in Rogers' basement.

"When CIDA closed its public participation program, which funded development education, it was a severe blow to regional development education organizations across Canada," says Lori Latta, the coordinator of the Saskatchewan Council for International Co-operation (SCIC), which is the province's umbrella organization for voluntary development agencies.

In addition to One Sky, the province's other development education groups, Common Ground and the Rural Interchurch Development Education Project Co-op, closed their doors one by one, Latta says. The scene played out right across the country.

But SILP still had a pulse.

Under an arrangement pulled together by former staffer Bill Robb, a core group of trade unions provided per capita funding to SILP at 25 cents per member. The sustaining members were the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union, some Canadian Union of Postal Workers locals, the Grain Services Union and the Canadian Union of Public Employees Saskatchewan Division.

The union contributions, along with raffles and T-shirt

sales, amounted to just over \$20,000 a year. Against all odds, SILP reopened its part-time office in Regina and resumed programming. In November 1995, eight months after development education's D-Day, SILP hosted Chilean community clinic worker Maria Isabel Tobar-Diaz on a tour of the province.

The federal government no doubt would have preferred a quick death for SILP, although they would never say so publicly. After the cut, federal CIDA officials claimed that development education projects would be eligible for continued funding under new initiatives. But SILP has never had a project approved under any of the new funds, despite numerous applications, notes current SILP chair Denise Hildebrand.

"SILP has a history of taking positions that are unpopular with governments, like our opposition to NAFTA," Hildebrand says. "I suspect there is a bias, given that SILP is often critical of its approach."

A visiting CIDA official was quite blunt about the matter. "Don't bite the hand that feeds you," he warned the group.

In fact, SILP bites hands that *don't* feed people, hands that enslave workers in unsafe factories, hands that kill trade unionists for speaking out, hands that chop budgets and encourage the free market global pillage. And sometimes these hands belong to our own federal and provincial gov-

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ernments which sign away our livelihoods in trade deals and "educate" struggling nations on how to deregulate, privatize, and lay open their economies to multinational corporations.

So it's not surprising the government hoped SILP would simply disappear. But that hasn't happened.

"We've survived with the support of the union movement and the dedication of board members and staff," says Diane Rogers.

"Saskatchewan labour has really shown its staying power, and its commitment to educating itself and the broader community about global economics and development," says SCIC's Latta. SCIC is one of the few funding sources to maintain and actually increase its grant to SILP in the past few years.

Local unions continued their support because they saw a connection between global trends and the condition of working people in Canada. While repressive governments and corporations were busy creating a seamless international web, unionists had some catching up to do.

"SILP has played an important role in bringing an international perspective to our union education," says SGEU education officer Sharon Hurd, who has called on SILP to deliver workshops on such things as the Multilateral Agreement on Investment and Mexican maquiladoras.

Other support fell away in the past four years, how-

ever - notably the backing of SILP's founding members, CUSO and Oxfam.

In Oxfam's case, a combination of cutbacks and new funding directives turned their annual grants to SILP into project funding that very quickly trickled away into nothing. At the same time, CUSO lost all its funding for education work in Canada, says Hildebrand, who herself worked for CUSO until they closed their Saskatchewan offices.

In the meantime, CIDA claims to have re-directed its international labour and co-operatives education funding through national organizations like the Canadian Labour Congress. Sadly, very little of this money filters down to the prairies or to small NGOs, despite all the good work these groups do to promote labour rights on a global scale.

"There could be some mainstream bias against groups that are traditionally more on the frontlines, or perhaps the big unions are just more inwardly focused on their own programs," Hildebrand says.

When top national labour leaders speak from their podiums about working hand-in-hand with grassroots organizations to promote international solidarity, SILP volunteers can often be seen at the back of the room eking out a few dollars in T-shirt sales and raffle tickets.

"Good will only goes so far. You have to have that cash, too," Rogers points out.

Leadership aside, grassroots union members have al-

**T**he globalization of capitalism has led to today's concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small number of billionaires. The rich are much richer than they used to be, at the expense of a growing number of poor people and a shrinking working class and middle class. There are fewer jobs around these days. The rights of trade unionists in Canada and abroad are under increasing attack by the bosses and the governments they control.

It doesn't have to be this way. We can change the world so that everyone can have a good job, be a member of a trade union, and receive the benefits of society that they deserve.

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ways felt a deep, instantaneous connection to the linkage work SILP continues to promote. Last autumn, SILP finalized some time on the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour's busy convention agenda for two visiting South African nurses. When Lungiswa Maqaqa and Isaac Zulu took the stage and began singing the anthem of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, everyone in the room leapt to their feet in a thunderous and prolonged ovation. There was no need to explain to the delegates on the floor why workers must stand together.

Coming out of a four-year struggle to survive, a new wave of optimism is carrying SILP forward to the year 2000, Hildebrand says. SILP has adopted a new slogan: Unions Without Borders. Efforts are being made to expand its funding base; the Regina and District Labour Council is the first new sustaining member to come on board since the original four unions. Two enthusiastic young staff members have been hired through the Youth International program, there's a good chance of finally gaining access to some national union dollars to finance a much-needed worker education project in Chile, and the group has recently launched a labour website. More important, designer-conscious kids are becoming very aware of issues like sweatshop abuse, thanks in part to SILP's forays into youth-oriented sweatshop fashion shows. Not a moment too soon, the culture of resistance is finding new roots.

*Trish Elliott is a communications officer with the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union and a freelance writer. Visit SILP at [www.cableregina/nonprofits/silp](http://www.cableregina/nonprofits/silp), or call (306) 359-3470.*



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**The St. Catharines & District Labour Council strongly opposes the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the plans to negotiate a hemispheric treaty designed to facilitate unhindered corporate restructuring and advance the interests of the privileged few and the transnational corporations at the expense of workers in Canada, the U.S. and Mexico.**

**The St. Catharines & District Labour Council is unequivocal in calling for the Canadian government to withdraw from NAFTA and to oppose the planned Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. The St. Catharines & District Labour Council sees Briarpatch Magazine as an invaluable ally in the fight against such trade agreements and for the achievement of social justice for all working people.**



# Codes of Conduct

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*Maquiladora workers want not only employment,  
but employment with dignity.*

---

by Lynda Yanz

As Canadian labour, religious and non-governmental organizations begin negotiations with apparel retailers and manufacturers for a base code of labour practice, our counterparts in Latin America and Asia are also discussing the potential and limitations of codes of conduct.

I recently participated in a four-day conference involving women from Central America, Mexico and the Dominican Republic in evaluating codes of conduct as a possible tool to promote greater respect for the rights of women maquila workers. The May 3-6 conference was held in Managua, Nicaragua, and was hosted by the Movement of Working and Unemployed Women - "Maria Elena Cuadra" (MEC).

Given its history of work on the issue, it's not surprising that MEC was the host for the regional seminar. In 1997, MEC, along with women's groups in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras launched a campaign called "Empleo Si, Pero con Dignidad" (Employment, Yes, But Employment with Dignity).

The first phase of the campaign involved a massive lobbying and media effort, which included gathering 30,000 signatures on a petition calling on Nicaragua's Minister of Labour, Wilfredo Navarro, and the country's Maquila Association, to adopt a Code of Ethics guaranteeing respect for the rights of women maquila workers.

On February 1, 1998, Navarro signed a ministerial resolution formally adopting the Code. The following day, the owners of Nicaragua's 23 maquiladora factories en-



**Conference delegates visit the ECCO shoe factory in the Mercedes free trade zone in Managua, Nicaragua.**

photo: Lynda Yanz

dorsed the Code.

Although there is no formal monitoring mechanism for the Nicaraguan Code of Ethics, MEC plays a de facto monitoring role by bringing forward reports of worker rights violations. They recently completed an extensive "diagnostic" of working conditions in Nicaragua's maquilas, in which they interviewed over 1,500 workers.

MEC's strategy of using a code of conduct as a negotiating tool to pressure employers to fulfill their obligations to their workers is viewed with skepticism by much of the leadership of the Sandinista Workers Central (CST). Sandra Ramos, MEC's director, counters that her organization is prepared to use all means to protect jobs and improve conditions for women workers in Nicaragua.

Sandra is familiar to many Canadian labour and solidarity activists. In the 1970s and 1980s, she visited Canada frequently, representing the Women's Secretariat of the CST. Today, Sandra speaks on behalf of MEC, an organization she and a small core of former-CST women leaders founded in 1996. MEC is now one of the largest and most active



feminist labour rights organizations in Central America.

### Beyond Company Codes

The Central American "Code of Ethics" is one of the unique examples of a code campaign being developed from the ground up, through the active participation of the workers it supports.

More prevalent are codes of conduct adopted by the large retailers and brand name apparel giants, such as Nike, the Gap, and Liz Claiborne.

Recently, northern labour, religious and non-governmental organizations have participated in the negotiation of industry-wide or multi-sectoral codes. These go beyond company codes both in their language and in provisions for external monitoring and verification. Examples include Social Accountability 8000 and the Apparel Industry Partnership Accord in the U.S., the Ethical Trading Initiative Base Code in Great Britain, and the Dutch Code of Labour Practices for the Apparel Industry Including Sportswear.

Groups like MEC are quickly realizing that they need to understand these northern code initiatives and how to position themselves in relation to them.

### Southern Views on Codes

Women who attended the Managua conference, representing six women's groups and two unions from Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, came together to share the results of workshops they had carried out with women maquila workers in their home countries.

Through these workshops, they had gathered information on what workers knew about codes of conduct and whether they thought codes might be useful tools to improve working conditions and wages. The process mirrored a similar initiative that had been carried out the previous year by women's groups in Asia.

Building on the results of their research, forum participants looked in more detail at the content of codes from the perspective of women workers' priorities. They also began to discuss the more complex question of what kind of monitoring would be effective in ensuring that the maquilas and the North American companies that source from them would comply with the commitments made in codes of conduct.

The research confirmed what many of the groups already suspected: that the vast majority of maquila workers know very little about codes of conduct. Of over 500 workers interviewed in six countries, only one worker thought that perhaps there was a code operating in her factory. Others realized through the workshops that the "English diplomas" on the walls were probably codes of conduct.

However, the experience of participating in the workshops, gave workers more confidence in their rights, and a

better understanding of how codes of conduct might assist them in pressuring managers to respect basic worker rights.

### A Women's Code

Rather than start from the terms of already elaborated codes, conference participants identified a list of priority issues to be addressed in any code.

The resulting 12-point program was not unlike many industry-wide codes currently being promoted. It included provisions for a living wage, prohibiting discrimination, providing special protection for pregnant women workers, improved health and safety standards, and respect for local and international labour law on issues such as hours of work and the right to organize.

The two top priorities identified were wages and security of employment. The sentiments of Mayra Jimenez, the new Secretary-General of FUTRAZONA, a union organizing in the Dominican Republic's free trade zones, were echoed by other participants. "Even if we earn the legal national minimum wage, we don't make enough to feed ourselves, let alone our families."

Women also want an end to the use of financial and other punishments for minor "offenses." According to Rosa

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Medina, who works producing pants in a Korean-owned maquila in Guatemala, workers are regularly docked pay for arriving even five minutes late. "The managers hit us and then dock our pay, which often times we have to wait an extra week or two to receive. When we finally get our pay, we never know how it was calculated, because often times it comes in cash with no pay slip."

The participants agreed that given current wages, women need to work overtime to survive. What the women objected to was being forced to work overtime whenever their employer decides they're needed. They complained that supervisors usually don't tell them until the end of the day that they have to stay and work overtime, which gives them no opportunity to make other arrangements for their children.

Jacqueline Garcia, also of FUTRAZONA, described how work demands in her factory vary widely, from periods when they are forced to work intensively for long hours, to days when there is no work at all. On the slow days, workers can't even make their base wage.

"And managers make things worse by making piece rates dependent on the pace of production of the whole team," she explained. "It doesn't matter how many bra brooches I sew in an hour, my pay depends on the final output of finished bras. In order not to have to pay top rates, management combines experienced and new workers on the same line."

The bottom line of course is that workers want codes of conduct to protect their jobs, and not make them more vulnerable. They suggested that codes should contain a commitment from companies at the top of the sub-contracting pyramid, major retailers and brand name companies such as Nike, the Gap, and Levi Straus, to not "take flight from one day to the next" whenever workers demand their rights and improved wages.

### Monitoring Options

Participants in a panel on Monitoring and Verification were concerned that developments are taking place in the north that will have major consequences for them, developments about which they know very little, because the discussions and debates are usually taking place in English.

For example, they know that there have been divisions among labour and NGO representatives involved in the Apparel Industry Partnership (AIP) in the U.S., but are unclear as to what the main issues are that divide the groups.

Perhaps more significant, southern groups are being approached by professional auditing firms such as Price Waterhouse and companies such as Adidas, which are trying to make individual deals with NGOs to legitimize their own monitoring processes. Participants felt the need to develop more coherent strategies to deal with this onslaught.

While they recognized that it would not be possible

for NGOs and unions to take on monitoring the thousands of maquila factories in Central America, the Caribbean and Mexico, they were not convinced that professional auditing firms contracted by companies and through initiatives such as SA8000 and the AIP could provide reliable audits of working conditions and labour rights practices.

To be credible, they felt monitoring and verification processes would have to be endorsed by civil society, would have to include local monitors that have a knowledge of the country, the language, and labour conditions, and have the confidence of the workers. Most important, the process would have to be transparent. Civil society would have to know how and on what basis a factory came to be certified as complying with any code of conduct.

### Negotiating Solidarity

Those of us representing northern solidarity organizations at the conference, three from the U.K. and the Maquila Solidarity Network from Canada, were in Nicaragua to listen and learn, but also to discuss ways our efforts might dovetail with the concerns and priorities expressed by southern groups.

Sandra Ramos has a favourite story of solidarity gone wrong. She describes how a U.S. solidarity group managed to convince the U.S. tabloid TV program, "Hard Copy," to do an exposé on working conditions in Nicaragua's maquilas.

The program succeeded in producing bad press for the U.S. companies involved, but in Nicaragua, four workers were fired. To make matters worse, the "Hard Copy" program, which also aired in Nicaragua, ended with a plea to "buy American." The message neatly reinforced the maquila owners' charges that the motive behind northern campaigns is to keep jobs in the U.S. (or Canada, or Europe).

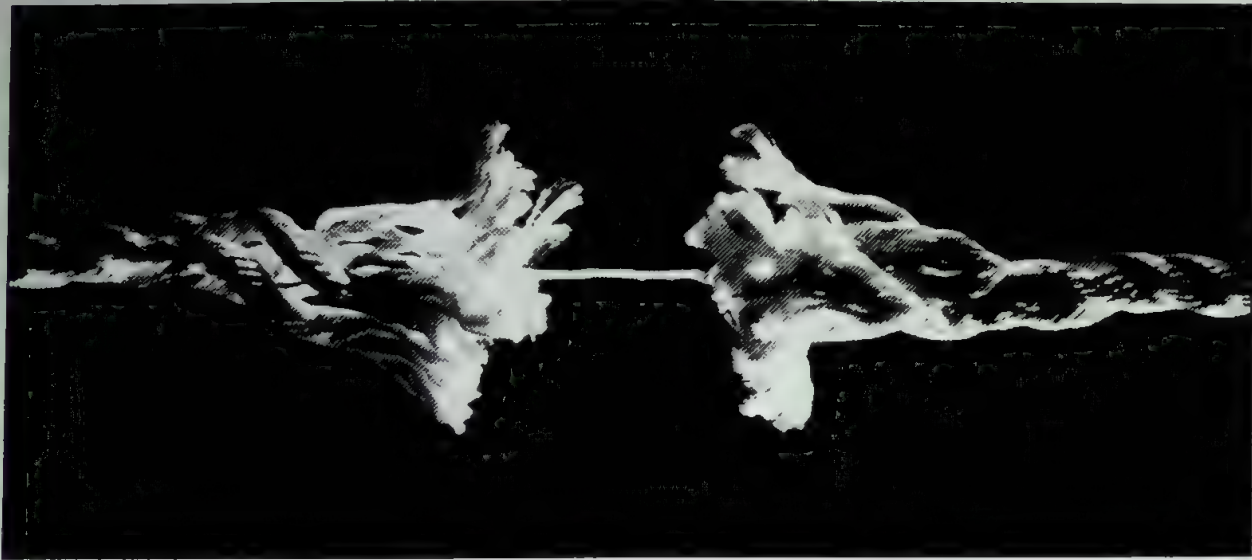
Sandra ends her story by saying that women maquila workers in Nicaragua do not support boycotts or any other strategy that will put their jobs at risk. In a country with over 60 percent unemployment, maquila jobs have become a premium. As Sandra says, "women want employment, but employment with dignity."

There's no question that groups such as MEC want to continue to collaborate with groups in the north on campaigns to improve conditions in the maquilas. But clearly the terms of solidarity are becoming more complex, as NGOs and unions in both north and south grapple with how best to support workers' efforts to improve working conditions without jeopardizing employment.

*Lynda Yanz is the Coordinator of the Maquila Solidarity Network. For more information contact: MSN, 606 Shaw Street, Toronto ON M6G 3L6; phone: (416) 532-8584; fax: (416) 532-7688; E-mail: [perg@web.net](mailto:perg@web.net)*



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# Sewing the Seeds of Solidarity

*The Via Campesina builds links into Africa.*

by Nettie Wiebe



*Women cleaning grain in a village near Dakar, Senegal.*

Walking across the spacious village square under the hot mid-afternoon sun, I was struck by the brilliant beauty of the women in their colourful clothes against the sparse desert landscape and the clear sky. But my farmer's eye was really focused on the state of the soil beneath our sandals. How could anything possibly grow in this sand? The best beaches in Saskatchewan couldn't boast such fine, dry sand.

The increasing degradation of the soils and the encroaching desertification in many parts of the African sub-Sahara region (66 percent of Africa's arid and semi-arid land is affected) was the focus of a Forum of African Peasant Organizations from countries that are signa-

tories to the United Nations Convention Against Desertification. The Forum, held in Dakar, Senegal from November 4 - 7, 1998, brought together peasant leaders from 14 African countries. The host organization, the Conseil National de Concertation et de Cooperation des Ruraux, took the opportunity to invite the Coordinating Committee of the Via Campesina to meet with our African counterparts. The Via Campesina is an international movement of peasant and farm organizations committed to building solidarity among people of the land in order to defend peasant agriculture, culture, the environment and communities against the onslaught of transnational agribusiness and its free trade agenda.



The history of Africa is one of colonial rule where Africa's riches were extracted for export to Europe and America. At its worst, these "resources" included people - Dakar was the key port of exit in the slave trade to the Americas. And the exports have always included a long list of agricultural products, often produced on Africa's best land with the cheap labour of peasants displaced by the plantations.

The historical systematic exploitation and marginalization of Africa is currently continuing under the new guises of globalization. While approximately 90 per cent of African peasants, the majority of whom are women, engage in subsistence farming, this invaluable work of feeding people is made increasingly difficult in today's harsh economic and environmental conditions. Food producers lack adequate equipment and the means of restoring soils which are degraded by over-use and drought.

The soils surrounding the village we walked through near Dakar had been used intensively to produce peanuts for several decades. Currently, the villages of the district have formed a co-operative project to try to restore the lost fertility with rotations of other, more suitable crops. Peanuts have fallen from being about 45 percent of Senegal's export produce a few decades ago to the current five percent level. But that cropping pattern, as with other intensive export-oriented production, has left degradation and environmental destruction as a legacy. And whatever wealth was generated by the previous peanut production seemed to have gone abroad with the peanuts as there was no evidence of it left in the villages.

The most urgent immediate problem we heard the most about from the farming people had a very familiar ring about it: the prices for their agricultural products are too low to

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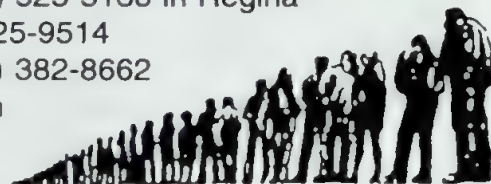
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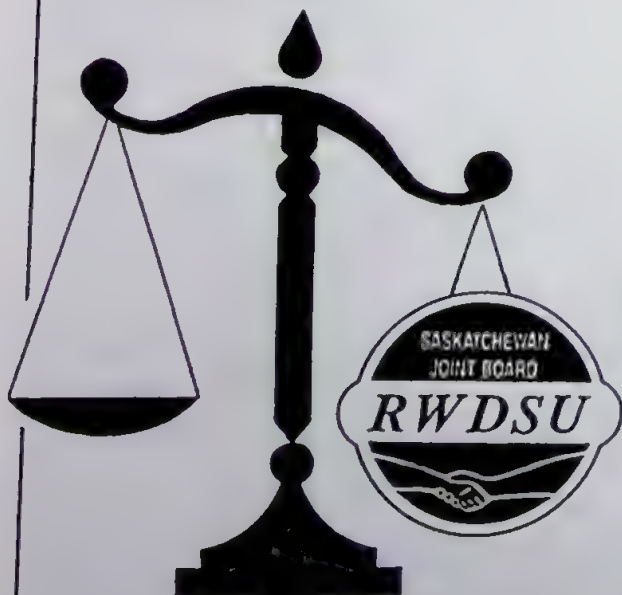
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enable them to survive. The importation of low-priced products from elsewhere in the world (food dumping) is destroying the domestic food market by undermining the prices of locally-grown products. For example, the dumping of excess meat production from Europe has made cattle prices low and volatile enough to make it uneconomic for many peasants to continue to raise local cattle. This is changing farming practices as well as making it increasingly difficult for peasants who had relied on small cattle herds to continue farming at all. It is contributing to growing poverty and food insecurity - and the movement of people from rural to urban areas.

The experiences of the Senegalese peasants were reiterated with small variations by many of the peasant leaders from elsewhere in Africa, and rang familiar to those of us farming on other continents also. The globalization of the food trade under the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the systematic undervaluing of peasant agriculture are leading to increasing food insecurity, environmental degradation and the destruction of rural society in many parts of the world.

The forum on desertification and the discussions between peasant representatives from Africa and the Via Campesina members reinforced some key issues for all of

us: that we are all affected by the globalization of agricultural trade, that peasant and small-scale farming is threatened everywhere and that the protection of our environment, our food security and our way of life must be undertaken by peasants working in solidarity with each other around the world.


The Via Campesina, an emerging global movement of peasant and small-scale farmers, has developed initiatives around some key themes which include struggling for food sovereignty (the right of people to produce their own food as opposed to being forced to sacrifice domestic production on the altar of free trade). This requires agrarian reform to give people access to land for food production. Given that women are both most often responsible for household food security but least often afforded equitable economic and social means to carry that burden, the Via Campesina is committed to achieving gender equality. The violence against people of the land in many parts of the world makes the struggle for human rights and solidarity a necessary part of the progressive peasant movement.

The firsthand experience country people have of the environmental degradation resulting from current production practices makes finding methods for alternative agriculture an urgent necessity. But although peasants have been protecting and regenerating nature's store for thousands of years, WTO patent laws strip this possibility away from them and hand it over to the corporate sector. Genetic resources and biodiversity, on which all food production depends, are at stake because of the advent of genetic engineering and the patenting of life forms.

Despite the struggle to find adequate resources to act in the global context, the Via Campesina has effectively inserted the interests of peasants into many international venues ranging from the meetings of the Convention on Biodiversity to the World Food Summit and the United Nations Committee on Sustainable Development dialogues. As a movement which encompasses hundreds of organizations and tens of millions of members, the Via Campesina seeks to articulate the authentic voice of peasants and small-scale farmers in a myriad of contexts from the local and regional to the global, building solidarity among people of the land across cultures and continents.

The themes of the Via Campesina found resonance among African peasant and family farm organizations. Because the problems facing people of the land have global reach, the initiatives to find solutions will require some world-wide solidarity. And the road to long-term solutions definitely winds through the African countryside.

*Nettie Wiebe, who gave up the presidency of the National Farmers Union, is the North American Coordinator of the Via Campesina. She continues to farm at Laura, Saskatchewan.*



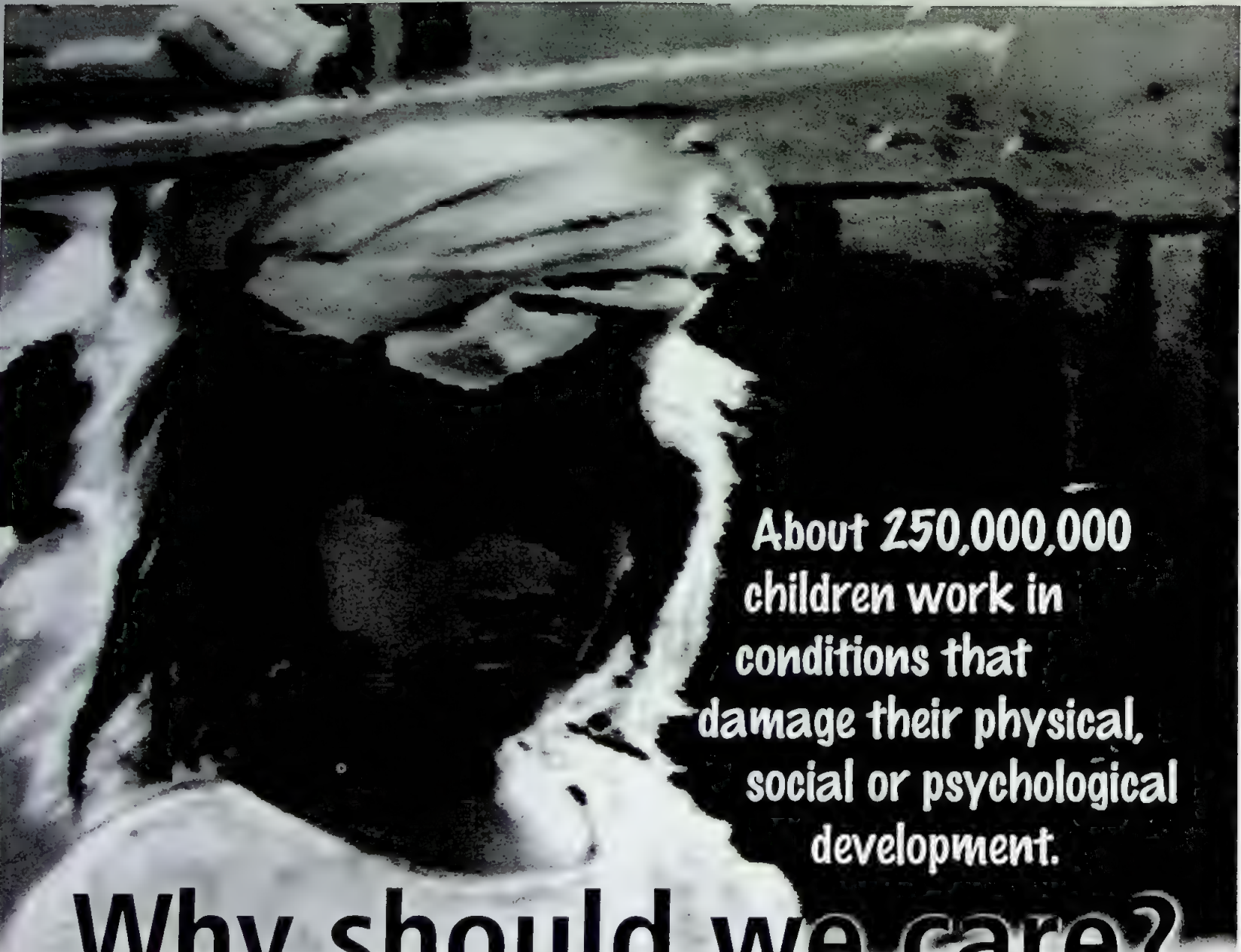
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# THE MISSING LINK

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## USING ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS TO LINK LABOUR AND SOCIAL STRUGGLES.

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BY SID SHAIAD

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I hope that you will forgive my impatience, but I'm getting frustrated with an argument generally made by people who don't use electronic communications, insisting that today's information technology has little or no practical use in the hands of people involved in social struggle. You've undoubtedly heard the line yourself: "Emerging information technologies *could* challenge the powers of the great corporations, but to date we have little evidence that the use of such technology represents a real threat to corporate domination in advanced capitalist societies."

In my view, this is the wrong formulation of the issue. It's true that the use of the new technology, by itself, poses no threat to established power structures. But when it is incorporated into progressive struggles, today's electronic communications can have an enormous impact. Undoubtedly, the best known example of a struggle that was strongly affected by the deployment of information technologies was waged by the Zapatistas in southern Mexico. In that situation, electronic communications were utilized as a key tool in the political struggle against the corrupt and repressive Mexican government and its local allies in Chiapas. The Zapatistas' struggle has not been completely successful. But their use of electronic communications enabled them to get their message out to the wider world. By focusing world attention on what would otherwise have been an isolated struggle, they were able to prevent the Mexican government from acting on its plans to annihilate the activists in the region.

A less known but potentially more important example of the innovative and skilled use of electronic communications was provided by the successful struggle waged against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) by popular sector organizations around the world. The MAI was an

ambitious neoliberal blueprint designed to massively reinforce corporate rights by enshrining them in a wide-reaching and binding international agreement. Its corporate architects were seeking to imbue companies with the power to prevent and/or punish anti-corporate actions on the part of governments attempting to pursue economic and social policies for the benefit of their constituents.

The attempt to ram the MAI down our throats ultimately broke down. But what is not widely known is that the use of electronic communications played an important role in the struggle that undermined this corporate blueprint. In April 1998, the *Globe and Mail* ran an article headlined *How the net killed the MAI*, describing how "a global band of grassroots organizations [armed] with little more than computers and access to the Internet, helped derail" the draft deal. The article con-

tinued:

"When the Council of Canadians got its hands on a draft version of the MAI, the document was posted on its Web site and circulated to the organization's allies around the world. Extensive analysis of the document as well as strategic planning of actions against its passage were then coordinated through e-mail correspondence."

"Indeed, international negotiations have been transformed after this week's successful rout of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) by opposition groups, which - alarmed by the trend toward economic globalization - used some globalization of their own to fight back."

"Using the Internet's capability to broadcast information instantly worldwide, groups such as the Council of Canadians and the Malaysia-based Third World Network have been able to keep each other informed of the latest developments and supply information gleaned in one country that may prove embarrassing to a government in an-

ELECTRONIC  
COMMUNICATIONS IS NO  
SUBSTITUTE FOR OTHER  
ACTIVITIES. BUT IT CAN  
DEFINITELY HELP INFORM  
ACTIVISTS AND MAKE THEIR  
COMMON EFFORTS MORE  
EFFECTIVE.



other. By pooling their information they have broken through the wall of secrecy that traditionally surrounds international negotiations, forcing governments to deal with their complaints."

"We are in constant contact with our allies in other countries," said Maude Barlow, the Council of Canadians' chairwoman. "If a negotiator says something to someone over a glass of wine, we'll have it on the Internet within an hour, all over the world."

"The success of that networking was clear this week when ministers from the 29 countries of the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development admitted that the global wave of protest had swamped the deal."

"This is the first successful Internet campaign by non-governmental organizations," said one diplomat involved in the negotiations. "It's been very effective."

While the use of electronic communications has provided neither the Zapatistas nor the opponents of the MAI with a victory over their opponents, to renounce its use on this basis misses the point. To expect the use of technology, by itself, to transform a political situation along progressive lines distorts the issue. Information technology simply offers progressives a valuable tool in such struggles.

There are those who dismiss out of hand the possibility that information technology can be put to positive use because it has been developed by the same corporate forces that are reshaping the world according to their own anti-social priorities. Ironically, those who make this argument end up reinforcing the right-wing message that "There is No Alternative" possible to capitalist globalization.

I would be the last person to minimize the threat posed by runaway corporate control in general or by the domination of corporate communications and information industries in particular. Nevertheless, taking a one-sided view of this technology's potential ignores profoundly important struggles that have taken place in recent years - struggles which were fundamentally influenced by the use of electronic communications. In an era characterized by proliferating social crises, I believe that it's wrong-headed to dismiss the use of electronic communications as a tool in the struggle for a better world.

A case in point: I personally make extensive use of electronic communications on a daily basis. Despite - or maybe because of - the dreadful quality of Canada's daily newspapers, owned by neoliberals like Conrad Black, I use electronic communications to check out stories on newspapers' web sites all around the world. I regularly tune in to

*The Guardian, Le Monde Diplomatique, The Nation* and other alternate sources of information. When I find something of interest, I cut and paste it into an e-mail message

and circulate it to hundreds of people who subscribe to my (free) e-mail list.

The success of this effort can be measured by the fact that I am often contacted by people located in far flung places across the world, asking to be put on my list. They invariably say that a friend or acquaintance has received mail that originated from me that has been passed on by other friends and acquaintances.

Another example: I work for a union representing people who work in the telecommunications industry. In today's world of ever-changing technologies, corporate take-overs, plant closings and downsizing, it's essential for people facing similar problems to

be in touch. To share information on these matters, I use an e-mail list for unionists, profs and other activists who share an interest in developments in the communications industry. E-mail enables us to share information as things develop and to mount a common response.

All this may make it seem that I'm a technological whiz. I'm not. In fact, I know next to nothing about computers or the technology of communications. I know just enough to use them to communicate in much the same way that I know enough about cars to use them to travel around.

It would be silly to characterize electronic communications as a magical tool that can solve all of the world's problems. At the same time, however, anyone who's serious about promoting social change in today's world is missing a bet if they neglect to make use of this medium. Electronic communications is no substitute for other activities. But it can definitely help inform activists and make their common efforts more effective.

*Sid Shniad works for a union based in Vancouver.*

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- George Cohon,

senior chairman of McDonald's Canada.

Cohon opened the first McDonald's in Russia in 1990. Today there are 49 franchises. But with Russia's current economic crisis, McDonald's has doubled its prices and slashed wages. A Happy Meal now costs two days' pay.



## McUSELESS

"Nobody wants to join a union any more. Aside from a few victories here and there, union organizing drives are mostly exercises in futility. They dump small fortunes into useless attempts to break into McDonald's hamburger outlets, Starbucks coffee shops, and fried chicken franchises. Unable to get adults to sign union cards, professional organizers spend their time talking up teenagers working at summer and part-time jobs. But even teenagers are too smart to sign union cards, no matter how much neo-Marxist collectivism has been poured into their heads by members of the teachers' unions."

- Terence Corcoran,

editorial in the Conrad Black-owned Financial Post, April 22, 1999.

## SUCKED IN

"We've signed a stunning new trade pact with Canada. The Canadians don't know what they have signed. In twenty years they will be sucked into the U.S. economy."

- Clayton Yeutter,

U.S. chief trade negotiator, immediately after the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was signed October 3, 1987.

# Say What??

## IT'S ABOUT TIME

"It appears Canada is about to lose its historic auto pact with the United States, which trade officials believe will be struck down by the World Trade Organization in a ruling this summer. We say it's about time."

- Lead editorial

in The Globe and Mail, July 13, 1999.

## PRAY FOR PROFIT

"Father, please pray for profit, because we always do that at Ford."

- Richard C. Honecker,

an executive of Ford Motor Co., speaking at the opening of Aguirre Safety Technologies, a non-union plant in Detroit that will make air bags for Ford.

## WHO NEEDS LIMITS?

"It is pushing at the limits of what society will accept, but in a way it is not such a big deal."

- Professor Kevin Warwick

of Reading University in England, after he had a microchip implanted under his forearm last year to demonstrate the technology. Several British companies, including banks and technology companies, are looking at the technology to help them monitor where their workers are and what they are doing.

## WORK, WORK, WORK...

"At least in China we had regular hours and we could go home to take a break. Here, you work day and night."

- Ching,

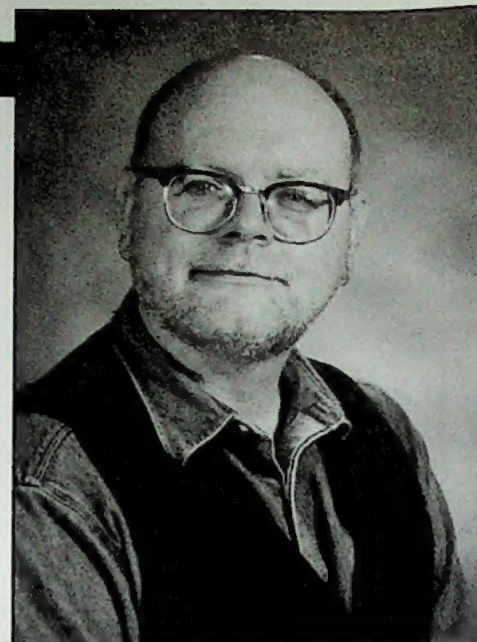
a Chinese home worker in the garment industry in Toronto who emigrated to Canada in 1992. She gets paid less than the minimum wage and used a pseudonym because she fears reprisals if her employer finds out her true identity.



# INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY THEN & NOW

THE WORLD IS OUR PICKET LINE.

by Eugene Plawiuk



In 1995 Liverpool dock workers took job action in solidarity with fellow dockers who had been fired. This illegal strike put them in a confrontation not only with their bosses, but with their national and international union and eventually with Tony Blair's New Labour Party. While this could have remained a local struggle, the dockers went worldwide with their fight to save one of the last unionized docks in Britain. Their struggle was against globalization: privatization, contracting out, containerization, etc.

With the help of the Internet and the World Wide Web, the Liverpool dockers' struggle became a battle not only on the docks, but around the world. Their slogan: "The world is our picket line," has become the watchword for revitalized labour international solidarity work.

While not completely successful in their strike against privatization, the Liverpool dockers showed the labour movement that we could take on the new global capitalist world order using their own technology against them. Struggles that were thousands of miles away, such as the Korean General Strike, were happening on the web here and now. With the use of e-mail, web pages and fax machines, a new stage of protest and solidarity work has evolved.

The Internet and World Wide

Web have become a new battle front in the age-old class war between workers and bosses. Globalization has created its own opposition: there is a new spectre haunting the Internet - a new international workers' movement is being borne in cyberspace.

The global agenda of business to open the world up to free trade has made every struggle our struggle. International solidarity campaigns in the past were often seen as charitable work; we were well off workers in the industrial capitalist countries helping out the poor and oppressed abroad, to bring them to our level of economic well being and human rights. Campaigns were often isolated to the true believers and the truly committed. They were often based on unions and activists learning about oppression in the developing world. Our solidarity often reeked of "save the children" morality, "us" helping "them."

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union as a great power, international labour organizations such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and other Internationals had to confront their purpose in the New World Order. The Cold War ended and even the American Federation of Labor was forced to look at its old alliances with the American State Department and the CIA. No

longer having anti-communism as an excuse to separate workers worldwide into "them" and "us," globalization has created conditions for international solidarity work to become more meaningful not only to trade union bureaucrats, but to the rank and file in the labour movement.

Globalization has forced us to see we have a common struggle, whether it is in Regina, Manila or Chiapas. Privatization and free trade mean that international solidarity is key to any union struggle locally. The saying: "Think Globally, Act Locally" applies to all of our struggles in the coming millennium.

*Eugene Plawiuk is an executive member of CUPE Local 474, the Edmonton Public School Board Custodial Workers Union. He is Chair of the International Solidarity Committee of CUPE Alberta Division. Eugene also administers Labour Net Canada ([www.labournet.ca](http://www.labournet.ca)) and Canada Labour News on the web.*

*My Opinion does not necessarily represent the editorial views of Briarpatch. We welcome submissions and encourage any ensuing dialogue.*



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